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Fantasy & Science Fiction

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Esther Friesner reports that her recent efforts include a collaborative novel with Mercedes Lackey, as yet untitled, and that her fourth "Chick" anthology, The Chick Is in the Mail, will be out in January.

This new fantasy story was inspired by a trip to Chartres cathedral. At one point, Esther heard "beautiful, silvery threads of music that seemed to spiral down from no visible source in the shadows above." Further examination, however, revealed a young man playing a flute in front of the cathedral and some trick of acoustics obviously drew the melody into the building.

Read on and see how our Connecticut bard transmuted this small scene into a lovely yarn.

Hallowmass

By Esther M. Friesner

MASTER, THE HEART OF THESE things came to pass in the autumn of the year that the great cathedral neared completion. Beyond the town walls the fields were

nearly bare and the forest put on splendor. Bright leaf crowns of bronze and purple, scarlet and gold flung themselves over the secret fastnesses of the wood where terrors crouched. In the shorn fields asters winked blue among the stubble. And everywhere, in the streets and on the narrow track slipping between the hills to the outlying villages, there was song.

The countryfolk sang because their harvest was done and the war had slithered its huge, armored body far into the south that year. Mothers sang cradle songs to cradles where for once no spectral hand of famine or illness or whetted steel had crept to touch and take their babes. Farmers bellowed drinking songs in the taverns because singing drowned out the noise of backbones that creaked and snapped when honest working men at last unbent their spines from the labor of reaping and stacking, threshing and winnowing the grain.

Giles was a man who made his songs with stone. He was well past the middle years of Adam's sons, his raven hair streaked and stippled with gray, his beard blazed silver like the back of a badger. When he first arrived, over fifteen Easters ago, no one in the town knew where he came from or who paid out his wages. He presented himself to the widow Agnes who had a small house hard by the cathedral's growing shadow and offered her a fair price for the rental of a room, food to fill his belly, and the free use of her modest yard. The yard stood behind the house and was supposed to contain the widow's humble garden, but the plastered walls of the house itself hoarded sunlight from what few plants struggled their way out of the sour soil, and in time the cathedral's rising walls shouldered aside almost everything but shadows.

The widow Agnes therefore did not complain too loudly when the nature of Giles's intent for her property was made known. The very next day after his arrival, a dust-faced man named Paul the Brown presented himself at her door driving a cart with a load of fresh timber. She recognized him as one of the bishop's lowest-ranked servants and kept her thoughts to herself when Giles rushed out to greet him eagerly. Together the two men transported the lumber into the widow's yard and from it built a spacious, slant-roofed shed on ground where flowers often had been planted but never had lived to bloom.

In the days that followed, the widow Agnes witnessed more strange shipments arrive on her doorstep for her new boarder. There was a small, sturdy table, a stool standing on four fat legs, a coarse hempen sack that clanked demons out of the widow's white cat Belle, and lengths of sailcloth, thick with pale dust and neatly folded. All of these effects were trundled out to the shed in the yard where some were put in place and others put into ironbound chests of wood that locked with a *snick-clack* sound like jackdaws laughing. Last of all came the stones.

A squadron of servants showed their yellowed teeth to the widow when she answered their thunderous summons on the day the first more-than-man-size block of stone arrived. As with the first servant, Paul the Brown, their faces were all familiar to her — work-creased vizards of skin glimpsed in passing on market day, or when the widow's curious eye wandered during mass, or in the shadow of the tavern sign.

The leader of that burly crew doffed a cap frosty with dust and asked,

"Where'll Master Giles have it?" He gestured to the block of raw-hewn stone on the cart behind him.

"Master Giles?" the widow echoed. Her commerce with the man until this had been scant and small (and she a woman whose inquisitive tongue could winkle out a fellow's life history in the time it takes to break a tinker's promise!). She knew him by that name but not that title.

"Aye, this is the first of 'em," the servant said. He might have said more, but Master Giles was there, white Belle a mewling ghost at his ankles. He spoke with brief courtesy to his landlady, begging her pardon for not having forewarned her of this visitation while at the same time telling her no more about it. Then he hustled forward to direct the men to move the block of stone into the widow's yard, under the shelter of the shed.

Some days later the widow Agnes found the form of a man emerging from the great stone. Crude as God's first tentative pinchings in the red clay that would be Adam, Master Giles's man lacked the features of a face (unless the first hint of a high-bridged nose could be reckoned to that credit) and could be said to possess human hands only as a courtesy to the lumpy mass of rock at the ends of what *might* have been arms.

Master Giles saw the widow staring at his work and grinned. His thick hair and beard were now all white with the breath of chiseled rock, as if the stone were sucking away his allotted lifespan, but he worked bare-armed and bare-chested in the pleasant summer weather and the knotted muscles moving sleekly beneath the skin cried *liar!* to any who dared to call him old.

"Good day to you, goodwife," he said, still swinging the hammer, still holding the steel-edged cutting tool to its task. The tapping blows and the chinking sound of the stone's thousand small surrenders underlay his words in a smooth, steady rhythm. "What do you think of my Saint Clement?" He lowered the hammer and gestured at a protruding lump of rock with the chisel. "Here's the anchor that dragged him to a glorious martyr's death. I would have given him a stonecutter's tools, but my lord bishop would discover my vanity all the earlier then." His hearty laugh was for himself and for all the petty conceits of a fragile world.

The widow crept nearer, but she could see neither the offered anchor nor the stonecutter's point. His smile did not mock her when she

confessed herself either bewildered by the light or merely bewitched by her own ignorance.

"You will see the anchor in time," Master Giles said kindly, setting his tools down on the worktable and taking her plump hand in his calloused palm. "The saint is still being born. You see, my lord bishop has brought me here for the cathedral's sake. I am to adorn the south porch below the great rose window with twelve figures in stone, and since Master Martin whose province is the north porch has already laid claim to the Twelve Apostles, I have a free hand in the choice of my saints. I thought to begin well by invoking the protection of Saint Clement. He has always been a friend to those of my trade. The Emperor Trajan tore him from the papal throne and sent him as a slave to the marble quarries of Russia, but even there he made conversions and worked miracles. Once, they say, his faith called forth water from a rock for the sake of his fellow-slaves' thirst. Soon after, he was flung into a great sea, the anchor around his neck. The angels themselves built him a stone tomb beneath the waves. That is beyond me, so I do this, to his glory."

The widow Agnes bobbed her head. She loved the tales of saints' lives, for she was a devout woman — all the more so since her husband had gone to sleep in a churchyard bed. He took with him to eternal rest the staff with which he used to beat his bride, but he forbore to fetch away his money. If this was not proof of divine grace, it would do for the widow Agnes. "Which saints will you choose for the other —" She did a quick tally — eleven?"

"I don't know," said Master Giles. "Saint Barbara, perhaps, to keep the peril of fire far from the holy place, and Saint George to aid the farmer and protect good horses. Who can say?" His smile was whiter than the fresh-cut stone as he glimpsed Belle's pointed face staring boldly out at him from behind the widow's skirts. "I might even carve a likeness of Saint Anthony to mind the fortunes of some small animals in need of watching."

The widow Agnes laughed out loud and told him he was a sorry rogue, and that she would warn my lord bishop of the jackanapes he'd hired for the adornment of the south porch. Then she brought Master Giles the good wine from the cellar and when the sun's setting cheated the eyes of gossips everywhere, she took him to her bed.

The years ran and the cathedral grew. The shapes of saints blossomed

in the widow's yard and were duly bundled away to their places in the niches of the south porch. The widow and Master Giles lay down together many times with only simple human comfort in mind and awoke one morning startled to find love had slipped between the sheets. They did not marry, for the talk would crumble Master Giles's favor with the bishop as surely as it would destroy the widow's fame for piety and prayer. There did come a time in that first mad year when the widow had cause to travel south to settle a matter of inheritance among her distant kin, but she returned within a sixmonth and all was as before.

The little white cat Belle birthed many litters and died, leaving the wardship of the widow's house to her daughter Candida, who was also furred with snow. And one hot August day the widow died of a sweating fever that carried off many souls besides her own, leaving the care of her house to a distant relative and the care of Candida to Master Giles.

The distant relative turned out to be a spinster of the breed that seem born crones from their mothers' wombs. She was called Margaret, dead Agnes's far-removed cousin, a woman who had never married and therefore begrudged the joy of any woman who had. She was able, for charity, to forgive those who found themselves bound in miserable, loveless matches, and so for a time she had made Agnes her favorite. But when Agnes's husband died leaving the lady young enough and rich enough to live on sweetly content, Margaret came near to choking on the injustice of it all. Or perhaps it was only her own bile that rose to fill her throat.

Margaret lived with her parents in a village whose chief product was stink. After they died, Agnes sent her cousin plentiful support, the only fact which allowed Margaret to reconcile herself somewhat to Agnes's good fortune. She had less trouble reconciling herself to her own when the news reached her of Agnes's death and her own inheritance.

She arrived on a raw December day when Master Giles was just finishing work on his ninth saint. She came mounted on a fat donkey, purchased with the first portion of Agnes's bequest. (A clerk of the cathedral was guardian and messenger of the widow's estate. He it was who took word of Agnes's death and final testament to Margaret, along with a sum of money to finance the spinster's journey to her new demesne. Agnes had made a sizable gift to the cathedral as well as to her cousin, and so it was plain courtesy to see that good woman's affairs well settled.)

Margaret drove the donkey on to the timpani of her bony heels against the animal's heaving sides, a stout stick in her hand playing counterpoint on his rump. The poor beast's brayed petition of mercy to heaven roused every street through which they passed. So loud was her advent, and so well heralded by the urchins running along beside her, that Master Giles himself was lured from his beloved stone to see what nine-days' wonder was invading his emptied life.

When she drew up abreast of the late widow Agnes's house, the spinster Margaret jerked on the donkey's rope bridle and slid from the saddle-blanket with poor grace. The throng of merrymaking children who had joined in her processional swarmed around her, offering to guide her, to hold the donkey's bridle, to perform any of a dozen needless errands to justify their continued presence underfoot. Master Giles saw with horror how the woman raised her stick, threatening to treat the children after a fashion that was unfit to treat a donkey.

"Go home, children," he said gently, stepping into their midst and placing his towering body as a shield between them and Margaret's stick. "Off with you now, you're wanted home." The children giggled and darted away, all save one.

"Who are you?" Margaret demanded of the stonecutter, her lips thin as meat cut at a poor man's table.

"I am Master Giles, in the service of my lord bishop."

"Oh." Her mouth was small and hard as a prune pit. "You. The clerk said you pay rent and you work to finish the cathedral. My lord bishop would rather not have you moved."

"My lord bishop is kind," said Master Giles in such a way that he let her know how alien he thought kindness was to her heart.

"My lord bishop may command me," Margaret said drily. "So you are to stay, then, since it does nothing to inconvenience *him*. How much longer *must* you live here?"

"Until I have finished birthing my saints."

"*Birthing*? How dare you speak so of the holy ones?" Margaret squawked like a goose caught under a style. "As if they were slimed with the foulness of a sinful woman's blood? Ugh! I will report this blasphemy to the bishop and you will be made to leave my house before another sun sets."

Master Giles's eyes lost their tolerant warmth. "You may say what you like into whatever ears will hear it. I will deny it all. Do you think my lord bishop will risk the promised beauty of his cathedral for the sake of a lone woman's rantings?"

"I have truth to speak for me," Margaret said, stiffer than the carved draperies that clothed Master Giles's stone children.

"That's as may be," he replied. "But I have my saints, and my saints have my lord bishop's ear." He turned from her proudly and almost sprawled over the huddled body of the boy who crouched against the doorframe of dead Agnes's house.

"Go home, child," Master Giles told him. "Why do you linger here?" The boy looked up at the stonecutter with eyes as stony and unseeing as those of the master's carved saints and a face as beautiful as heaven. A blind man's staff leaned against his hollow shoulder but he did not have the shabby air of a beggar. His garb was well worn, simple, sufficient, and there was a bundle of belongings at his feet.

Margaret gave a harsh sniff. "This is Benedict," she said, and she seized the boy roughly by the wrist and thrust the lead-rope of her donkey into his hand. She barged into the widow Agnes's house without another word, leaving Master Giles to stare at the boy as blankly as if he himself were the sightless one.

The boy leaned on his staff and got to his feet, holding fast to the donkey's rope. "Is there a stable?" he asked, stooping to juggle rope and staff so that he might hold these and still take up his bundle.

"I will take care of the beast," Master Giles said, his tongue stumbling over the words as a score of unasked questions struggled for precedence. He tried to disengage the boy's hand from the donkey's lead, but Benedict refused to relinquish it.

"This is my work," he said. "I am always the one with the beasts."

Master Giles considered the boy's reply as no stranger than his bearing. He did not seem a servant, yet Margaret did not treat him as kin. "This way, then," he said at last, and set his hand on the boy's shoulder to guide him to the shack that served dead Agnes's house for a stable.

The house that once had warmed itself with love now steeped itself in ice. The house that once had rung with the sweet tempo of iron on stone, keeping time to a well-loved woman's morning song, now sheltered

only silence. Margaret provided Master Giles with food and shelter and free use of the yard in accordance, to the letter, with dead Agnes's first agreement with the man. No less. Certainly no more. The stonemason could find no matter for complaint in the quality and quantity of his victuals, and yet he rose from the table empty, burning with a hunger of the heart, a thirst of the soul.

As promised, the boy Benedict was the one with the beasts. He took care of the donkey and later, when Margaret purchased a family of chickens and a brown milk-goat, he looked after these too. He was up early each day, leading his charges off to graze on what few mouthfuls of dry grass the town green afforded in the harsh weather. Master Giles heard his staff tap across the paving stones, falling into its own cadence somewhere between the quicktime of the goat's hooves and the steady clomp of the donkey's feet.

Winter closed over the town. It was a cruel season. Work on the cathedral slowed, with labor limited to only those artisans whose hands touched the interior of the sanctuary. Unfinished walls put on a penitent's shirt of thatch to keep the bitter weather from setting its teeth into the stone. Master Giles set up canvas walls around his shed and worked on in all weathers, so long as the frost did not grow deep enough to affect the fiber of the rock.

One morning soon after Candlemas, before even the whisper of dawn had touched the sky, he was roused from his lonely sleep by the voice of the stone. The hour was too early even for country-bred Margaret to be padding about. Master Giles tossed aside his blankets, did up his hose, and pulled on a woolen smock over his tunic. His bones cried out for a cloak, but he hushed them with the reminder that work would warm them soon enough.

He loped silently down the stairs and came into the kitchen. A breath of light from the fading moon silvered the edges of the shutters. Master Giles fetched a small iron pot and filled it with coals plucked from the hearth's neatly banked ashes. This would be all the heat he'd have in the shed, for a greater fire might cause the stone to split. It was enough to keep his hands from stiffening at his art, and that was all he asked.

The house was very still. He felt as if he were Lazarus leaving the tomb. Margaret kept the place clean as boiled bones, yet she did not speak

with Master Giles except to return his perfunctory salutations, to summon him at mealtimes, to give him messages from the cathedral, and to answer any questions he might ask. But while she tithed her words to him, the boy Benedict paid out none at all.

There was frost on the earth. Master Giles stood in the yard with his back to the house and raised his eyes to the great cathedral. "Five years or six and it will be done," he said, weaving white veils with his breath on the darkness. "Two years or three and it may be consecrated to use while the last touches are made on the outside. Had you lived to see it, Agnes — !" And his leathery thumb brushed the tears away before they could freeze into stars against the gray and black cloud of his beard.

It was then he heard the song. Thin and reedy, borne on a voice wobbling over words and music like a newborn calf trying its legs, it came so softly to the sculptor's ear that he almost doubted he heard it. But it was there. It was coming from the shed.

Master Giles felt something brush his leg. He looked down into Candida's flower-face. The white cat mewed inquisitively and he, feeling only a little foolish, motioned for her to keep still. He moved with the cat's own stealth to where the canvas walls were pierced by a loose-hung flap of sailcloth that kept out the wind. The song praised God for His all-sheltering love as the stonecutter crept through the doorway.

The boy Benedict sat on a heap of straw that warmed the feet of Master Giles's newest saint. The carved lamb that pressed itself against the carved lady's robes permitted thin young arms to wreath its rocky neck, made no objection to a dark head pillowed on its curlicued flank, did not protest the tears staining its gray fleece like the tracks of the rain. The boy sang through tears, his voice leaping and falling, trembling on a cusp of music and slipping from the precarious perch of a high note not quite grasped.

Master Giles held the music in his mouth and let the lovely, imperfect taste of it melt sweetly over his tongue. He could not take his eyes from the boy. His mind did not want to know the things his eyes finally told his heart. The stone face of the saintly virgin Agnes smiled down on the bowed head of a child whose face was the image of her own.

The white cat was not enthralled by human music. She ambled past the stonecutter, bright eyes of gold on the small, gray, squeaking temptations

which all that straw might hide. Seeing a tuft tremble, she crouched, haunches bunched, tail stiffly twitching, lips silently writhing over her race's ceremonial curse upon the whole tribe of vermin. Then she sprang.

If there had been a mouse in hiding there, he escaped her, but the boy's foot did not. Benedict shouted with surprise and flung himself backward as Candida's paws captured his ankle. His whole weight struck the statue.

Master Giles shot through the doorway, throwing himself forward to embrace the boy with one arm and to steady the statue with the other. Straw flew up in a sunburst of golden dust. The boy yelled again to feel Master Giles's strong hand on his arm. He flailed his limbs wildly, fingers groping for his staff.

"Ouch!" cried the stonecutter as the boy's heel struck his thigh. "Hush, hush, don't be afraid, it's only me." His words worked. The boy was still. Empty eyes could yet hold questions. Master Giles replied, "I couldn't sleep, so I came out here to work. When I saw the cat pounce on you, and you hit the statue, I was afraid you were going to knock...it...o...." Realization stole over him as he spoke, and he saw the same dawn on the boy's face as a smile.

The statue was nine feet of solid rock, Benedict a scant five feet of flimsy flesh and bone. "*Me* knock *her* over?" the boy asked lightly, dimples showing in a smile that belonged to the beloved phantom of the house.

"Why, yes," Master Giles said, falling gladly into the straightfaced fool's part. "With all your muscle, my poor saint would never have a chance to stand against you." And they both laughed.

He could tell the boy what he knew, then; what he had just then come to know. Shared laughter made shared hearts easier. The evidence of Master Giles's eyes did not come as much news to Benedict.

"I never knew you were my father, but I knew she was my mother," the boy said. "Margaret called me bastard so often when I was small that I grew up thinking it was my name. But when I knew the difference and heard her call her cousin Agnes whore, I knew that must be another way for Margaret to say that Agnes was the bastard's mother."

"I'll kill her." Master Giles forced the words out between gritted teeth. Benedict could not hope to see his father's knuckles whiten, but he could not help feel the stonecutter's corded arms tense with cold rage.

"Let her be," said Benedict softly, and his voice held the peace of

Christ. It was then that Master Giles knew there would never be anything he could refuse his son.

"She never told me she was with child," the stonecutter said, stroking the last of the tears from Benedict's cheeks. "If she had — " He shook his head regretfully for all things small and lost and loveless. The two of them sat in the straw at the feet of the stone Saint Agnes. Her arms reached out, turning her cloak to sheltering wings above them. The irreverent cat bounded onto the table and thence up to perch on the saint's crown of martyrdom. Cold dawn paled the canvas walls.

The boy ran his hand over the lamb's petrified curls. "You are carving this for her."

Master Giles nodded, then realized such silent signs were useless with his son. "Yes," he said. "This saint is hers. She will stand with Saint Clement and Saint George, Barbara and Anthony, Martin for my good friend Master Martin, Giles in thanks to my patron saint for his many blessings, Mathurin for all the fools of this world and sweet Saint Cecilia for music."

"Music," breathed the boy.

"You sing — you sing well." Master Giles was ill at ease with compliments. Even in dead Agnes's arms he could not put his tongue to lovers' words but let moans and kisses and the touch of hands speak her praises for him. "I heard you when I came out here this morning. I did not know the song."

"She taught it to me," said Benedict.

"Margaret?" He could not fathom that dry stick teaching a child anything but a catechism of bitterness.

Benedict laughed. "Can you really think such a thing? No, no, I mean the other."

"Your...mother?" Master Giles cudgeled his brains, trying to recall another time besides the secret months of Benedict's awaited birth when his lost love had left the town. He could bring none to mind.

The boy said, "No. I mean the lady." And he said no more, as if having said this was enough.

Master Giles felt like one of good Saint Mathurin's protected fools. "What lady is this? The wife of the lord of Margaret's old village? His daughter? A kinswoman?"

Benedict snorted all of these away. "If you could hear her sing, you would know. I met her in the woods, when Margaret sent me there to pasture the pigs. There were tumbled stones, and the broken tooth of a ridged column. In springtime I could feel tiny chips of rock like little slick scales under my bare feet, and places between them where the mortar had cracked and violets grew."

"A ruin," said Master Giles, who had passed many such places as he moved from town to town, following his calling. One time he had thought to spend the night in the shelter of half-vanished walls, sleeping on a mosaic of dolphins and vines, until his eye fell upon a toppled statue in the empty basin of a fountain. Lichens crawled across enameled eyes, moss clothed wanton nakedness, and still this work of a dead man's hands outshone Master Giles's finest endeavors. He fled the place, ashamed and aching with envy.

"She was there," the boy said. "I didn't know, at first. Then I heard the music. The words praised God, yet sounded...I cannot say how they sounded, not truly. Can praise hold sorrow? I called out, 'Who's there?' The music stilled. All I could hear was the snuffle and grunt of Margaret's pigs. I thought I'd frightened the lady away."

"How could you tell she was a lady?" Master Giles asked. "She might have been a peasant's daughter sent, like you, on an errand."

"You would not say so if you'd heard the daintiness of her song. A voice like that never called pigs home or shooed chickens," Benedict countered. "Besides, I caught her scent, all flowers; dewy and clean. When she returned, she gave me reason not to doubt, proof of what I already knew."

"She returned?"

"That very day. The wood was growing cooler; it must have been near sunset. I was whistling up my pigs — they're bright, obedient beasts or Margaret never would have trusted them to me — when I heard her song again. This time it was a different one, a hymn to the Virgin. I'd never heard the like. There was a year when the pigs bred so well, Margaret allowed me to accompany her to a fair at Saint Jerome's abbey. I heard the monks in choir and stood captured by the sound until Margaret gave me a knock on the head to hurry me along. I thought then that there could be nothing more beautiful in all the world than the sound of so many voices interwoven so perfectly." A wistful look crossed his face. "I was wrong."

There was something in his son's expression that troubled Master Giles to the heart. Blind, his boy must keep company with fancies more than most. Some fancies fevered the brain, bringing madness. What was all this talk of ladies met in the wildwood? The forest was no haven for the gently bred. It welcomed none.

The woods around this town were shrouded in dark legends, tales of the Fey with their cold immortal beauty who begrudged men their frail immortal souls. Their chief delight was robbery, pure and simple, snatching away the precious few comforts mortals could claim. With their deceiving ghost-lights they robbed the weary workman of his way home to rest when he crossed their lands by night. Their heartless swains led maidens to believe themselves beloved, let them wake to find themselves abandoned. Not even the innocent babe in the cradle was safe from their malice, their schemes at once bereaving mother of child and child of human love.

Was stealing a poor blind boy's sanity beyond them?

"My boy," said the stonecutter, trying to hold his voice as steady as he held his chisel. "My boy, think. What would a lady do in such a place, so late, so lone? Are you sure of what you heard? Perhaps it was the wind."

"Does the wind sing Christ's hosannas?" The saintly stone children born of Master Giles's hand had faces less set and stern than Benedict's.

"I mean, perhaps the wind brought you the sound of human voices from a distance," the man suggested. "There are convents in the wood, and the holy sisters — "

"I touched her sleeve. It flowed over my fingertips like water. I touched her hand. It was softer than the muzzle of a newborn foal."

"How did she come to permit these liberties?"

"The second time I heard her song, I rushed forward calling on her to reveal herself, in Christ's name. I couldn't bear to have that sound taken from me again. I imagined that if she was a Christian, she must heed my plea, and if she was not then the power of Our Lord's name would break her glamour and hold her where she stood." His look was rueful as he added: "When I ran, I tripped over a pig."

The agitation of Master Giles's spirit almost broke free as laughter. He smothered it. "She came to your aid, then?" The boy confirmed this. "And was that when you learned who this lady was?"

"She said she was called the lady Oudhalise." The boy pronounced

the outlandish name as easily as if it were plain Mary. "She told me that her kin lived nearby, but that I had found her at home."

"At home! In a ruin? A place with no stone left atop another? She must have been mad." The stonecutter was aghast at the thought of his son in such company.

Fresh tears trembled in the boy's milky eyes. "Then I wish I were as mad as she."

Master Giles cast his arms around Benedict and held him tight. "Don't speak so! For the sake of your soul, don't."

The boy was stiff in his father's embrace. "For the sake of my soul, she taught me her songs. We sat there until the night was cold around us and she sang for me until I had them all by heart. She told me, 'The women here once heard a man who told them that they could not enter heaven except as children. I can never be a child, but I long for the promise of your heaven. My songs are my offering to the Lord I seek, though the lord I serve would destroy me if he knew I give them to you. Take them into your heart. Take me with you to the gates of paradise.'"

Master Giles shook his head. *Madness*, he thought, but all he said was: "Poor lady."

"Yes," the boy agreed. "I have her face here, in my hands. She let me touch her face and left me after. I came back to that same place in the forest many times, but I never met with her again. All I have left is what she gave me." And now he loosed the longing of his tears.

Later that day Margaret could do nothing but mutter "Lackwit, madman, fool," when Master Giles announced he'd taken the blind boy to be his apprentice. Others said the same when the news went 'round.

"How can you do this thing?" Master Martin demanded as the two stonecutters sat in the tavern over wine. Outside the wind howled early March's chill damnation and blew away lost souls' last grasp on their graves. "He can't see the stone. How will he shape it?"

"You mind your Apostles and leave me to mind my saints," was all Master Giles replied.

All that he knew was the need to shelter his son from a world that would destroy him if it heard his tale of the lady in the wood. The only way he could see to prevent this was to take the boy into his care, and the one path open to him there was to name him apprentice.

In time, it might have been forgotten, but for Margaret.

The bishop did not care if Master Giles apprenticed himself a wild dog so long as his chisel continued to shape saints for the glorification of the cathedral. He praised the sweetness of Master Giles's Saint Agnes and could not commend the sculptor's skill highly enough when his next creation, the beautiful Saint Sebastian, drew the hearts as well as the eyes of all who saw it. (And if the saint's face was the image of the man's apprentice lad, what of that? Time enough to inquire into such matters after all twelve niches of the south porch held their treasures.)

It was Margaret kept things on the boil, Margaret whose tongue wagged free in the marketplace, the tavern, the church, the street. When Master Giles took Benedict for his apprentice, he stole away not only that woman's unpaid servant but the butt at which she shot her wormwood-tipped barbs. How could the loveless woman feel superior to the beloved dead if she could no longer hurl abuse at love's living proof? Her tongue had lost its whetstone and its target. All that remained to her was to hound Master Giles with a madman's reputation as punishment for his having taken away her sport.

"Let him be as mad as Nebuchadnezzar," said the bishop. "But let him give me saints." So Master Giles gave him next Saint Catherine of Alexandria. "That face!" the bishop cried when the sculptor and his workmen brought the finished statue to the cathedral grounds. "Twisted as an old grapevine's root. The holy legends rated her a beauty, but this is a shrew."

"Ah well...." Master Giles shrugged. "So many centuries, looking after the affairs of spinsters — " He patted the spiked wheel of her martyrdom. "That would turn nectar to vinegar, my lord, given the temperament of some of her congregation."

The bishop squinted up at the saint. "That face...Do I know it?" And weeks later, when his processional happened to pass Margaret in the street, the way he stared at her became her shame and the talk of the town for days.

Saint Catherine was Master Giles's eleventh saint. There was now only one niche below the great rose window of the south porch that wanted its tenant.

How strangely it all turned out! One day the boy who could not see

to swing a hammer against a chisel's head came across a lump of raw clay on his father's workbench. It was Master Giles's habit to mold his creatures out of clay before giving them their bodies of stone. Benedict felt the cool, pliable earth beneath his fingers and began to work it. As he worked, he sang one of his alien songs. His voice had mellowed with the years, learned steadiness, could hold to a tune the way a good hound held to a trail. It was a pleasure to hear him so melodiously praising all things holy, even if the music that fell from his lips was like nothing that ever rang out beneath the church rafters nor in the taverns nor in the distant fields.

"What's this?" cried Master Giles, coming up behind his boy and seeing the red mass under his hands. He reached over Benedict's shoulder and plucked the nearly finished figure from its creator's grasp. The stonecutter sucked in his breath in awe. The face of an infant angel dimpled up at him.

It was perfection. He had never seen the like. That cherub's countenance contained just enough of the earthly child's essence to give a man hope that even his stained soul might someday soar with the hosts of heaven.

"Is it good, Father?" Benedict asked softly.

"Is it good...." Master Giles could only stare at his son's handmade marvel while tears of wonder brimmed his eyes. "I will copy it out in stone, my boy, and lay it before my lord bishop himself."

So he did. The bishop was a canny man who knew the work of each of his cathedral worker's hands the way a falconer knows each of his birds by flight, when they are no more than specks against the sun. The bishop knew this angel was not Master Giles's work.

Master Giles said, "It was made by my apprentice, who is blind. He worked it in clay. All I did was give it a body of stone."

"The Lord closes only the eyes of the body," the bishop replied. "In His mercy, He has opened for this lad the eyes of the soul. Bring him to me. I am minded to see this miracle."

Master Giles did as he was bidden, his heart light. He knew, you see, that soon enough his work on the great cathedral would be done. Already he was considering the final saint he must carve, and once that was accomplished there would be no further call for him in this town. If it fell

out that another town had use for his skills, all would be well, but if not — He had gone the roads in idleness before this, sometimes for weeks, sometimes for months, once for over a year. When there was only himself to think of, the roads held no terror, but now —

Now the devil's fork held him: He could not subject a blind boy to the road. He could not abandon his son to the absent mercies of Margaret.

A miracle, my lord bishop calls him, he thought. Let it be so! What churchman would not be proud to keep a tame miracle in his court, especially now that there is a great cathedral to support? The relics of the saints will bring some pilgrims, but many more will flock to see beauty spring from the hands of the blind. Then and there he resolved to do everything he could to advance Benedict in favor with my lord bishop.

The first thing that he did was to bring the lad before the bishop, as the bishop had commanded.

"Well, my child, you must tell me how you did it," the bishop said, seated on his great chair of state while Master Giles helped his son to kneel and kiss the ring and rise again.

"What would you have me tell?" Benedict asked.

"Why, how you came to do this." The bishop held up the cherub's head. Then he realized that the lad could not know his meaning, lacking sight. "How you knew to make so exquisite a thing as this angel," he amended.

"Oh," said Benedict, nodding. "That was easy. She sang him for me."

The bishop sat a little straighter in his chair. "She?" he asked, and also: "Sang?"

Master Giles's hands tightened on his son's shoulders. "It is a true miracle, my lord bishop," he said hastily. "The lad himself told me of it. The Virgin Mary appeared to him in a vision of the soul, for which no man needs eyes, and sang of the glories of heaven. Thus he was divinely inspired."

"Ah." It was the bishop's turn to nod. He was a man willing to understand miracles, but not wonders. "And do you think this was a solitary vision, or might we expect more?"

"More," said Master Giles emphatically. "God willing," he added, seeing the bishop's eye turn hard and cold and narrow as the chisel's blade.

"Let us pray that so it may be," the bishop said drily, and laid aside

the angel. "It were a pity to spend all the inspiration of a vision on grasping so small a portion of heaven."

Later, as they were walking home, Master Giles asked his son, "What rubble was that you gave the bishop? 'She sang him for me'? He will think you a lunatic."

"She did." The boy was sullen. "My lady of the forest. I slept and saw her. It's happened before this, only I never had cause to speak of it. She was seated at a fountainside, singing praise to God. Oh Father, the colors! How sweetly they sounded on my ear!" His sulky look melted in the bliss of his remembered vision. "With her voice alone she built a stair of silver and gold to the very throne of glory, and up and down its length the angels climbed. Father, I think that I saw my mother among the blest. My lady sang her face for me so that I could feel it to my heart!" He embraced himself as if wings of joy had enfolded him. Then his shoulders sagged, his head drooped. "But she is dead, my poor lady of the forest, and kept from hope of heaven. Her songs of praise and her salvation are locked away from her Redeemer as deeply as if they were encased in stone."

Master Giles pressed his calloused hand to the boy's brow. "Have you fever?" he asked, feeling his heart drum panic. "This is no holy vision, but a sending from the damned. Don't speak of it! Not before any, man or woman!"

"But you asked," the boy replied simply. "And so did the bishop. I tell you, that is how I came to make the angel. Her song opened the vault of heaven to my eyes and left the shapes of all the saints and angels in my hands. I cannot forget them. I cannot forget her, or her pain, or her song."

"I am your father," Master Giles said severely. "I command you to forget." They walked the rest of the way home in silence.

Like most parents, Master Giles mistook silence for consent. So it was that by the time they reached dead Agnes's house he was convinced that his child was in no further danger of being branded mad for the indiscretions of his tongue. Indeed, the stonecutter felt secure enough in his dominion over the boy to revert to planning for Benedict's future.

"My son," he said the next day, "here is clay." He placed the boy's hands on a lump of the stuff that was at least five times as big as the quantity he was used to employ to make his models. "Make a saint."

"Father...?" Benedict turned toward Master Giles's voice.

"The twelfth saint for the south porch," Master Giles went on. "I want it to be of your design, just as you made the angel. Then I will carve it. You can do this, my boy." *You must do this, for your life's sake*, his heart implored silently.

Benedict sighed and rested his hands on the clay. "I can try," he said. And he began.

There passed a shiftless several weeks for Master Giles. Unable to work until he had Benedict's model before him, he roamed the town, fidgety as a dog with a skinful of fleas. He was not used to idleness, and so made himself a pest on the cathedral site, diverting the workmen with japes and stories, discussing problems in design with the master architect that had not been problems until he suggested otherwise. Mostly he knew the tavern.

But at last there came a morning when Benedict shyly asked his father to see what it was that lay hidden beneath the damp rag on the worktable in the shed. Master Giles removed the clay-stained cloth with the reverence a lover might accord the last veil between himself and the enjoyment of his lady's favors.

And then he stood as one taken by the immanence of angels.

Words flew through the town streets, darting from house to house like a flight of swallows. Rumor soared and dipped beneath a hundred roofs, coming at last to nest in the bishop's palace: The last saint was more than stone, more than flesh. The last saint of Master Giles's carving was the beauty of a blessed soul made visible.

Oh, how many came to see her, this incredible apparition! Hard Margaret stood ward at the gates of the house and used her broom to shoo away all comers save the highest as if they had been poultry. The bishop's grace she admitted, of course, though that churchman still had the tendency to steal shuddersome sideways looks at her in a way that got beneath her skin and itched.

"Magnificent!" the bishop breathed when Master Giles swept aside the cloth he'd used to shroud the last saint from prying eyes. "Is it Magdalen you've chosen to bless our final vacancy?"

"My apprentice chose her," Master Giles replied, growing fat with pride in his son's accomplishment and the bishop's obvious approval. But had that worthy of the church been paying any sort of heed, he might have

heard that Master Giles did not truly answer his inquiry as to the identity of this wonder caught in stone.

And so the bishop's servants came to carry off the last of the twelve statues and set her in her place along with all the rest, above the south porch of the cathedral. With her came the news that the holy place might now be consecrated, and all the town rejoiced with preparations for the great day.

Master Giles sat with his son in the now-empty shed. "The bishop is much taken with your work, Benedict," he said. A bowl of blushing grapes and shiny apples sat on the table between them, the first fruits of the coming harvest. "He would have you move into his palace and work for him."

"How shall I do that, Father?" Benedict asked, his fingers wandering over the boards until they encountered a plump grape and popped it into his mouth. "I can only work the clay."

"There are plenty of men who can copy out in stone what others make in clay," Master Giles replied. "There are precious few who can copy out in clay what exists only in visions. My lord bishop knows talent and has the power to shape the world around you into a most comfortable place indeed, if you will simply place that talent in his service. Your saint has stolen his heart."

"As she stole mine," the boy murmured. His father bit into an apple then, and the crisp report of teeth in white flesh kept him from hearing Benedict's words.

So it came to be, in that harvest season, that the countryside buzzed louder than a hundred hives with the great doings of the town. (The highborn must be called purposely, but the poor always hear the chink of alms and follow.) Peddlars' and mountebanks and wandering priests carried the news out of the gates, into the fields. (Who would not come who could? Which farmer's dreary nights and drudging days would not be enlivened for his being able to boast, in after years, *I was there!*) Word spread from the stone walls over the ploughlands and into the darkest recesses of the wildwood, where once a blind boy had pastured pigs among ruins. (In the twilight of a day that saw the town roads thick with travelers bound to witness the next dawn's consecration rites, a tall figure of inhuman slenderness and grace rose from his place beside a shallow, harebell-covered grave and called his vassals home.)

On the day of the consecration, Margaret rose grumpily from her bed and stumbled to the window, scrubbing the smut of sour-hearted dreams from her eyes. She pushed the shutters open and gave a cross look down into the street where already the populace was flooding the narrow thoroughfare, heading for the cathedral. Somewhere the bell of a smaller church was ringing. Water sloshed over stone. Roosters stretched their necks to the blade of the rising sun and crowed mortality's defiance of death.

Margaret tossed her woolen gown over her head and went downstairs without the formality of a face-wash.

Master Giles and Benedict were already up and about their business. Margaret's chill eye swallowed the boy's beauty as an insult to all her fixed ideas of sin and punishment. Not even his blindness could assuage her offended sense of morality this day. He was going to live in the bishop's palace — a bastard to live in luxury and ease who should have suffered and died for his mother's sins! Was this fair? Was this the reward her stale virginity had earned in this world? Only by setting her thoughts on the pious hope of fiery eternal torment awaiting the child hereafter was she able to enjoy her breakfast.

The three ill-sorted souls, whose only common ground was the shelter of dead Agnes's roof, walked out that morning in company. Together they made their way to the open space before the cathedral where the ceremonies would commence. There was a special place set aside for certain of the bishop's favored ones — Master Giles and Benedict among them. For this reason alone Margaret consorted with them, sticking so close they could not hope to escape her. She smiled grimly, knowing that a real man would have sent her on her way with a cuff, but that this great fool of a Master Giles never would do, because he was weak and silly.

It was as splendid a spectacle as ever any townsman could have hoped. The villeins who had come to gawp were well content with all there was to gawp at. Highborn men were there, and ladies so white they looked like milk poured into samite skins. Faces like painted eggs nodded beneath headdresses of terrifying weight and unpredictable balance. Gusts of musk and spiced orange puffed from tight-laced bosoms, little cloth-caged breasts seeming hard as cobblestones.

There was to be a procession, it was said. Sweet-voiced children garbed in white would march with pure beeswax tapers in their chubby pink hands, singing hymns and anthems. The bishop would come gowned in music, every glint of his jeweled robes tossing a garland of notes against the sky. Or so the whispers ran.

There were many whispers, many murmurings. The crowd bumped and jostled all along the route the bishop and his suite were supposed to follow. The nobles and the peasantry alike would not be still for fear that they might miss the chance to pass along the all-important cry of "There they are!"

As it happened, they need never have worried.

Where did it come from, that uncanny hush that fell so suddenly over all the town, like the stillness before a thunderstorm? The ripe, red-gold sunlight of October drained to gray. Men looked up and could not tell the stone bastions of the cathedral from the sky that stood behind. Even the rooks who had haunted the cathedral since its inception were quiet. A lady dropped her rosary. Pearls clattered over the stones like the bones of martyrs tossed out of their tombs.

And then, a lone, sharp cry to shatter the stillness: "There they are!"

There were horses. There were never supposed to be horses. The bishop's procession was supposed to be afoot, a show of humility for the people to remember. Yet here were horses! Indeed, for an instant those who saw the tall, proud mounts doubted their eyes, for the beasts made no sound at all as their silver-shod hooves passed over the pavement. The open space before the cathedral filled with them — black and smoke and roan — and the richness of their trappings would have left the bishop's robes looking like a beggar's rags had my lord bishop been anywhere in sight.

Where was he? No one thought to ask; no one cared to answer. The eyes of all present were devoured by the sight before them, for if the mounts of that eerie parade were worth noting, the riders were impossible to ignore.

High and haughty the lords of elven sat their gemmed and lacquered saddles. Hair like hoarfrost streamed down in gossamer falls that overlay their horses' trappings with a mantle more glorious than any weaving from a mortal loom. Lords and ladies of the Fey came riding, tiny winged

dragons perched on their slim wrists as ordinary men might sport a favorite falcon. They rode up to the very steps of the cathedral and there they stopped and stayed.

"*What blasphemy is this?*" boomed the bishop. He seemed to have come out of nowhere, all his splendor made invisible by the awe which the Fey had conjured so casually from the people. He was not a man who relished being overlooked. He stood between the elven host and the bulky fortress of his faith, gilded crozier in hand, as if to offer them battle. "Begone, you soulless rabble! May the devil claim his own!"

"May we all claim our own this day," said the foremost elvenlord, and his soft words lilted with such melody that the bishop's promised child-choir would have sounded like a clash of copper pans beside him.

"What do you seek here?" the bishop demanded, eyeing the elvenlord with the narrow mind's suspicion of beauty.

"We know our quarry," came the cool reply. And the elvenlord flicked the bridle of his mount just enough to make it resume its leisurely pace around to the south porch of the cathedral.

The crowd did not seem to move, and yet somehow the passage of the Faerie host drew mortals along with it the way a stream in flood will carry all manner of oddments along in its course. Master Giles certainly did not know how he came to be there, yet there he was, in full sight of the south porch with his son's shoulder under his guiding hand and even Margaret's stack-o'-sticks body a comforting presence at his side.

The elvenlord was pointing up. His slender hand made bright with diamonds, blue and white, was pointing at the row of saints above the porch, below the rose window.

"Give her back to us," he said, "and we will go."

They knew whom he meant, mortals and elves alike. There was no need for him to stipulate. She stood apart from her eleven companions as a dove among jackdaws. Her lips were parted as if her stony body were a spell that had overcome her at her prayers, freezing on her tongue all her pleas for divine clemency, her petitions for heaven's compassion.

Not for herself, that mercy she implored, no, much as she might require it. There was that in her face to tell any with heart (if not eyes) to see that all her unsaid, unsung prayers were for the outcast, the helpless, the one who does not even know he stands in need.

"Do you know," the bishop was heard to remark, "on second glance I don't think that's the Magdalen after all."

"She is my sister, the lady Oudhalise," said the elvenlord. "A fool, but still a lady of the Fey. She broke her heart with hankering after your mortal talk of heaven. There was no need for her to perish. We are immortal, when we own the wit to enjoy immortality. Still, she died, she pined and died, fading from our court like a frost-struck flower. She lies buried in woodland earth, poor witling, and there let her lie. This likeness is an insult and a desecration."

"I never thought I'd stand in agreement with an elf," the bishop muttered.

"Give her back," repeated the elvenlord.

"Take her, then," the bishop spat. But his venom was all in his eyes, and these were aimed elsewhere. Master Giles saw the poisonous look he and his son received from my lord bishop, and he felt his bowels go cold.

"I may not," the lady's lordly brother replied. "If it were so easy, would I have troubled your petty rites? She may not be taken unless she is freely given."

"Well, then, consider it so. I give her back to you more than freely — gladly!" The bishop used his crozier in the same style that Margaret had used her broom to shoo away unwanted visitors. A child in the mob giggled.

Still the elvenlord demurred. "She is not yours to give." His eyes scanned the press and met eyes that could not tell that they were sought. "She is his. Let him give her up and we will go."

They tore Benedict from his father's grasp and hustled the lad before the bishop, before the Faerie host. The boy's unseeing gaze rose as the elf-lord uttered his demand again: "Release her, boy, and we may yet depart leaving you as we found you."

Master Giles wrung his hands, for he knew his son's response even before the words left Benedict's lips: "That I will not. I can't give what isn't any man's to hold."

They fell upon him with words at first — both sides of the quarrel, elven and mortal. The bishop and all his suite exhorted the lad not to be a fool, to speak sense, to give this unholy congregation of visitants whatever it took to effect their banishment. Only do that, they told him,

and his insane blasphemy (Whoever heard of an elvenlady in the company of saints? Merciful God above!) might in time be absolved. On their side the elves spoke less and said more. Would he choose to give them what they asked or did he want to die? It was that simple.

Then all fell silent again, and Benedict replied, "I've already said all I can say: I can't give what isn't mine. Her soul is her own, God have it in keeping. I have only offered it a haven, a shell of stone it must outgrow, soon or late, as surely as the flower breaks the seed that holds it safely through the winter."

The elvenlord's laughter was like perfect music with the heart torn from it, all a fair seeming, but meaningless. "You speak of souls in the same breath with our kind, boy? Are you so ignorant, or do you play some idiot game? I am in no sportive mood, I would be gone quickly. I tell you, it is like an agony of cold iron in my eyes to have to remain in your midst, seeing the crudeness of your mortal cities, the ugliness of your mortal faces. I have not come here for pleasure; I have come for my own."

"If she were your own, you'd have her," the boy replied mildly.

"Come now!" the bishop cried, thumping Benedict smartly on the shoulder with his square-fingered hand. "It's common knowledge that these creatures of fire and air are soulless as stone!"

The boy turned his face toward the bishop's voice and said, "Then this knowledge is very common, but knows nothing at all, either of souls or stones." His head swung back vaguely in the direction of the elvenlord. "You were her kin, yet you never knew her. If you dreamed you loved her at all, you loved her as a mirror of yourself. But I — I have no use for mirrors. I held her image not before my eyes, but in my heart. She knew love, forgiveness, mercy, prayer. Knowing all these, could she help but know God? Could she do other than own a soul? I have heard it preached how the rich man Dives turned the beggar Lazarus from his palace gate and burned in hell for his sins. Will the same God who judged Dives thus for uncharity lack charity Himself? Will He turn her from the gate of His cathedral now?"

"Boy, you walk dangerous ground," the bishop said harshly. "Who taught you it was your place to speak of Scripture? Your elven woman is of no importance to our Lord. How can He even be aware of her presence, when it takes a human soul to call upon His mercy and be seen?"

"I do not ask Him to see," said Benedict. "Nor did she. Only to listen." And he closed his sightless eyes, pressed his hands together, and opened his mouth in song.

It was the song that Master Giles had heard the boy sing while his fingers worked the clay. It entered his body not by the ears but by the bones, the blood, the pulsing of the heart. Note by tremulous note, it was a song meant to ascend the golden steps of Paradise.

And then it was gone, sharply, abruptly, with no warning. Benedict sprawled face-down on the stones before the south porch of the cathedral, a little trickle of blood running from his head. Over him stood Margaret.

"Damn you, you bastard limb of Satan, give this creature what it wants and let it be gone!" she shrieked, waving the cudgel with which she'd struck the boy. It was a piece of wood garnered from the trash of the street, bristling with splinters. Master Giles stood as one lightning-struck, unable to believe the brutality he'd just witnessed. Margaret ranted on at the unconscious boy: "You'll have us all killed by faerie magic, else turned over to the Church courts for harboring a heretic like you!" She whirled to face the elvenlord. "Take your sister! Take her! Have no more dealings with the boy — he's mad! I am his guardian and I speak for him. Take her! She is freely given!"

The paralysis left Master Giles's limbs in a rush of red hate. He leaped forward with a roar, hands hungering for Margaret's skinny neck. She shrieked and threw herself for the bridle of the elf-lord's steed, hoping perhaps to merit his protection as his good and faithful servant. The elf-lord merely tugged at the reins and caused his mount to step primly back, out of the way between Master Giles and Margaret. The stonecutter's hands met the woman's papery flesh and closed tightly around her windpipe. The egg-faced highborn ladies chirped and twittered, fine hands fluttering like doves in delight over the unexpected treat of spectacle and death.

And then the miracle.

They could not tell — none of them who stood there in the great cathedral's shadow that day — they could not say just when they first heard the music. It was simply there, like the air and the sunlight and the smells of the town. Some claimed it fell from heaven, a shower of angelic voices. Some raised work-hardened hands to thick, ungainly lips and

dreamed that the voices they heard were their own, transformed by some greater power, raised in a song whose words and music they had never been taught but had always known.

It was a healing, that music. It stole Master Giles's hands from around Margaret's neck and set them to raise up the body of his son instead. It set the bishop's heart and not just the words of his mouth on forgiveness, love, salvation. It was a song kin and child of many songs: A mother's voice rejoicing over a blessed cradle; a husbandman's rough cheer over a day's work done and well done; a virgin lass weaving dreams of love into the melody that springs unbidden to her lips when she first sees a young man's smile that is meant for her alone; an old woman crooning a low, contented tune by the fireside where even her dwindling life is beloved and welcomed by those around her.

Master Giles was the first to recognize the true source of that song. "The statue!" he cried. "The statue is singing!" He held his son's limp body to his breast with one strong arm and with his free hand gestured wildly at the stone he had carved to match his son's clay model, the saint who was called soulless sister to a lord of Faerie.

His words said all and said far too little. More than a single miracle had put on a skin of music there that day. More than the single statue molded prayer into melody as a blind boy molds beauty into clay. The lady's image did not sing alone. All the stone saints sang together with her, and all the people of the town, and all the stones of the cathedral too until the heavens could not help but hear the sweet, pious petition of one yearning heart.

All the people of the town? No. Margaret stood cold and still as any stone, unmoved by the chorus of life and love surging up around her. "Fools!" she bellowed, red-faced, into the faces of the noblewomen. "Idiots!" she roared into my lord bishop's own enraptured gaze and moving lips. "Break this spell, shatter this glamour, burst this evil enchantment into a thousand pieces!"

But all that broke was the twelfth statue in its niche. It burst from the inside out, like a bubble, and something small and pure and brilliant flew from its shattered core and soared into the waiting smile of heaven.

Silence held the square before the great cathedral, silence and all its awesome host, flourishing their smoke-streaked banners. Neither elf nor

mortal dared to break the holy reign of that innumerable army that laid ghostly swords to living lips and stole away all chance of speech.

But all sounds are not speech, and often it is the unarmed scout who steals from the city gates and breaks the encircling army's hold. A sob rang out in the bright fall air, and the sound of a man falling to his knees on stone, in his arms the still, pale body of his son.

It seemed like such a little hurt, the blow cold Margaret dealt blind Benedict. Yet who has the eyes capable of seeing beneath the skin? Whose sight can discern the tracings of mortality's doorways on the smiling skull? Who among us can tell at which of these gates of blood and bone a single knock will open a wide way for the dark-winged angel of death?

Benedict sagged in his father's arms, the warmth fast leaving those thin limbs, his lips still parted in a song he would never finish. Master Giles cradled him close and let his tears water eyes now sightless forever.

At length his raw grief eased and he became aware of a slim, strong hand on his shoulder. Reluctantly he lifted his face from his boy's stone visage and turned to meet the gaze of the elvenlord.

"Mortal man," said the master of the Fey, holding his wondrous steed by its golden bridle, "I do not pretend to understand your miracles. As I am soulless, I have no need of your heaven, no fear of your hell, and all your past and future are a single summer's day to me. I have never tried to understand your kind any more than your kind have tried to see the world through the eyes of the cow you drive to the slaughter, or the donkey whose back you break with burdens, or the stray dog you kick away from the fire. And yet — " His voice, so flawless, caught itself upon the bramble of a sob. "And yet this — this I think I understand."

Master Giles, voice rasped over the elvenlord's words. "What good is all your understanding when I have lost my son?"

They gathered around him then, all the lords and ladies of Faerie, all the masters of the Church, the people of the town. Some kissed his cheek, some only touched his hand, some begged blessing of dead Benedict's fragile corpse, others stared at the little body with the relic-hunter's rapacious hunger, biding time and opportunity. Those mortals who could not find a way through the press to reach the body looked angrily about for the hand that had struck down the child. Not because to take so small a life was horror enough; for them such losses were a common thing, an

immutable face of life's harsh rule, to be clucked over and tidily forgotten when they raised a stick against their own younglings. No, these good folk wanted Margaret's blood because she had robbed them of a living saint, of fresh miracles his song might have made their due, of the chance for their own reflected glory. A great clamor arose from the crowd, a cry of hounds.

It was a very lucky thing for Margaret that the bishop's entourage ringed her first, or she would have been raw strands of flesh and bloody bone by the time the mob was through with her. She stood between two men-at-arms — shaking with fear, weeping for her own fate — until the stronger of the two dealt her a backhand blow to buckle her knees and make her keep still.

The bishop called for peace, but all he got was silence. His robes, stiff with their fine embroidery of gold and silver and pearl, cut a furrow through the mob like a plough's wooden tooth tearing up the soil. He stood over Master Giles and said, "God's mercy is great, His judgments beyond question. For your son's life, we have purchased sight of a miracle."

"Sight...." The word rang hollow in Master Giles's throat and the laughter that followed left many men thinking of the echoing grave.

The bishop was not one to be belittled by his servant's inattention. He meant to do a great thing here, before his new cathedral, so that ever afterward his action might be linked to the miracle and his name remembered. "Life is God's to give," he said with proper solemnity. "We cannot restore what He, in His wisdom, has chosen to take. Yet this much I can do: You shall cut me a new statue to stand in the twelfth niche and it shall be the image of your son." He beamed down on the desolation of Master Giles's heart as if further tears from the stonecutter would be an act of basest ingratitude.

Ingrate that he was, Master Giles wept on.

The bishop's smile shriveled. "What ails you, man? What more would you have of us? I tell you, life lies beyond my power to restore! The woman who has done this shall be punished, be assured of it. We will hold her imprisoned until your son's image has been raised to its proper place, then carry out her sentence on these very stones, so that her death may be under his eyes!"

The ruler of the Fey, once more astride the saddle, moved his steed a

few steps nearer to my lord bishop's bejeweled person. The churchman's blazing splendor dwindled to an ailing firefly's light beside the elf's cool beauty. "I too would make a remembrance of this day," he said.

The elven lord spoke words like the sounding of glass chimes and a cold, silvery mist fell over the square.

Master Giles gave a small, sharp cry and rose to his feet, his arms empty. The mist drew in, gathering itself over Benedict's dead body like a winding sheet of frost-struck churchyard moss, molding itself to breathless flesh until all the child's seeming was gray and cold.

And then the mist was gone, and Master Giles knelt again beside his lost love's child to touch his fingers to a smile now forever set. "Stone," he breathed. "He is stone."

He only half-heard the Faerie spell that next touched the image. The stone figure of the blind boy rose upon the hands of a thousand airy servants to settle itself at last into the embrace of the vacant niche below the great rose window. So lovingly did they bear the boy's frozen shape that they barely stirred the shining rubble that remained from that other, shattered statue. In truth, only a single fragment of stone fell when they set Benedict in his final resting place.

It was very small, that bit of rock, but it had far to fall. Some say it fell. Some say it flew, guided by a ghostly hand, to strike its only proper target: Margaret. Fallen or flung, it struck her hard enough, where she stood between the bishop's men. It brought her down.

At first they thought she was dead, but that might have been because her heart had hardened itself pulseless long ago. Then someone felt her breath against his skin and cried out, "She lives!" There was a murmur from the crowd then, a confused grumble of voices. They did not know whether to be disappointed that she had not died outright or pleased that she was still theirs to hold for the burning.

Then she opened her eyes. They were stone. Not blind, my lord — I mean no clever jongleur's trick of words and meaning — but stone as hard and gray and smooth as a carved saint's hand. Here was another miracle, but one the people fled, even the hosts of the Fey, even my lord bishop's men, whose swords had known the taste of blood in Christ's name.

Only Master Giles remained behind with Margaret. None know what he said to her, or if words passed between them at all. All know that when

the next day's dawning came, she crept out of dead Agnes's house, her hand on the stonecutter's arm. And so it was each day until he died.

She begs before the cathedral now, a clump of rags and sorrow seated beneath the niche that holds blind Benedict's image. Bereft of Master Giles's aid she was soon the prey of every passing rogue, every marketplace sharper, a summer sheep swiftly shorn of all she had. No man or woman of this city ever raised a hand to prevent this, piously pointing out that it would be wrong to interfere in heaven's manifest judgment against the woman.

There are always too many, Master, who will harp readily to no other verse than God's vengeance. And yet these are the same who stood before the great cathedral and witnessed proof of His unbounded mercy! Ah, me.

Some say her punishment came as holy penitence, others whisper how it was a shifty trick of the Faerie host, done more by way of mischief than morality. Who knows? Give her some coins, Master, if your heart is not made of the same stuff as her eyes, and listen to the ringing sound the coppers make when they drop into her begging bowl. And then, as she is blind, be blind yourself and let your charity also fall into the empty bowls of all who huddle in the shadow of God's house for mercy's sake.

There. Do you hear it? Some say it comes from the dead child's image, that sweet song, the soul's own, the melody that breaks open the hard shells that hold us here, that shatters the stone that forms around our hearts, that anchors us to earth when we yearn for heaven: The song of the soulless who truly know the value of a soul.

Or do you not hear it yet? Will you ever hear it at all? I have heard the wise men teach that in the Gospel's tongue *charity* is but another word for *love*. More coins, my lord — an open hand, an open heart. Let them fall like angel voices, let them chime out the hope of a full belly, a warm cloak, a roof against the rain. From those few notes must arise that wondrous melody that rises from us all whenever we give the poor more than a rag or a dish of scraps or the cold lecture that they are themselves to blame for their poverty. More love, my lord, more kindness, more music of the soul redeemed!

And that is all my song.





BOOKS TO LOOK FOR

CHARLES DE LINT

Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone, by J. K. Rowling, Arthur A. Levine Books/Scholastic, 1998, \$16.95.

Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets, by J. K. Rowling, Arthur A. Levine Books/Scholastic, 1999, \$17.95.

Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban, by J. K. Rowling, Arthur A. Levine Books/Scholastic, 1999, \$19.95.

I'M A LATE convert to this series, but since you might be as well, I think it's worth a brief discussion. Originally published as young adult novels, the Harry Potter books have gained widespread fame outside the limits of both the fantasy and young adult fields for one good reason: they really are wonderful books that can be enjoyed by readers of all ages. And

happily, there are no cliffhangers here; the novels stand up quite well, each on its own.

The series begins with *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. For some reason, the U.S. publisher decided to change the title from its original: *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*—perhaps they thought that Americans wouldn't understand the reference? Anyway, here we meet Harry, learn a little bit about his background as a potential magician living in a world of Muggles (ordinary, non-magical folk), and briefly touch on his ten years of hellish childhood (courtesy of his aunt and uncle, who raised him with extreme ill-will), then follow along as he enters Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, which exists on another plane of existence from our own.

It's classic British boarding school fiction with the delicious twist of magic and a decidedly different curriculum.

Harry Potter and the Chamber

of *Secrets* finds Harry as a second-year student at Hogwarts and proves to be just as enchanting and entertaining as the first book — a rarity in itself, when it comes to books in a series. By the third book, readers are welcoming back old friends, hissing at the recurring villains, cheering Harry's Quidditch team (Quidditch is a kind of aerial basketball played on broomsticks with five balls), and completely enthralled with the new mysteries that arise. And let me add here that Rowling is one of the few authors who, while playing fair, has still taken me by surprise with who the villain is in each book.

But it's young adult, you say.

Yes, Harry's only eleven when the series begins, but these are not your regular young adult novels, though they do bear a superficial resemblance. They're smart and clever, funny and serious, but most importantly, they're not written down to any particular age group, so that they can be equally enjoyed by readers of all ages. Harry isn't a little adult either; he's subject to the awful insecurities that plague all children. But he's also a gifted child, so the ways he deals with his adventures don't feel out of character.

Rowling plans seven books in

the series, one for each year Harry is at Hogwarts. Each year Harry grows a little more mature and the books reflect that in how the characters react to and deal with situations, so it'll be like watching your children, or those of a neighbor or sibling, growing up.

Yet the real draw is Rowling's language, her grasp of character (and caricature), and her ability to write humorously without being slapstick or cynical. In fact the only thing that surprises me about the success of the Harry Potter books is why they've been so readily embraced by such a wide spectrum of readers, while Diana Wynne Jones, who's been doing this also, and with as much warmth and skill, for so many years, is still best known only within the fantasy and young adult fields. No disrespect to Rowling; she deserves all the kudos the books are receiving. But I'm hoping the door she's opened might also allow some of Jones's wonderful books to slip through into wider acceptance as well.

The Fox Woman, by Kij Johnson, Tor Books, 2000, \$24.95.

What a strange love triangle Kij Johnson has shaped for us with her new novel: Yoshifuji is a man

fascinated by foxes, a man discontented and troubled by the meaning of life. Kitsune is a fox who loves Yoshifuji and becomes a woman to be with him. And Shikujo is Yoshifuji's wife, determined to win him back from the wild, for all that she has her own fox-related secret.

Johnson brings characters and setting lovingly to life through the first-person viewpoints of these three. The ancient Japan she describes is a world of formalities and custom, where the exchange of poetry is a form of conversation and everything has meaning, from the color of the silks one wears to how one may address others and whom one may address. It's a world that Shikujo understands in all its precise detail, but that her husband Yoshifuji rejects. A world into which the fox-woman Kitsune intrudes, with disastrous results for all of them.

And then there's the magic. It lies thick upon everything, from mysterious fox magic that allows shapechanging and the creation of a pocket world nestled under an old gatehouse, to the very real presence of ghosts and spirits and the eight million gods worshipped by humankind. The setting, with its formalities and details, rings with depth and clarity, and proves, in all its

historical accuracy, to be far more fascinating than the secondary worlds usually created for fantasy novels. For if one sets aside the magics, this is a real historical era, a true part of our world's past, and as such, becomes all the more interesting since it allows us a glimpse into, and an understanding of, the history that shaped the people of one of our world's great nations.

But it is also a story about people trying to understand each other and the times they live in. When the dreamland of fox magic and the world of humans mingle, confusion and danger results. Seeing through the illusions found in either is a task that can bring much pain, but allows for great joy, too, for those strong and brave enough to take responsibility for their own lives and confront the truth of who they are.

The Fox Woman is a wonderfully evocative and gripping novel, a book that will stay with you and resonate in your heart long after the final page is turned.

Hannibal by Thomas Harris, Delacorte, 1999, \$27.95.

Like thousands of other readers (if the bestseller lists are anything to go by), I was in the bookstore in

early June to pick up my copy of the new Harris novel. I wonder how many of them had trouble finishing the book, because I certainly did.

The book starts out as strong as one might expect from the author who, howsoever inadvertently, created the serial killer genre. We're reintroduced to FBI Special Agent Clarice Starling, following along as first she takes part in a drug bust that goes awry, then becomes a victim of FBI politics. Hannibal Lecter, who escaped custody in *The Silence of the Lambs*, is still at large, and Starling is still working on his recapture. But now Paul Krendler, one of her superiors in the bureau, not only wants her discredited in the bureau, but is also helping one of Lecter's earlier victims, the multimillionaire Mason Verger, exact his revenge on Lecter.

So things are as fascinating as one could hope for when Harris takes a hundred page aside to follow an Italian policeman's discovery of Lecter and said policeman's subsequent role in delivering Lecter to Verger. What bothered me about this section is, first, that it distracts from the main story, and secondly, it begins to set Lecter up as a sympathetic character.

We finally return to Starling's investigation, where she is ham-

pered by her superiors, and then more so by Krendler getting her removed from active service to, unwittingly on her part, serve as bait for Lecter. It's here where the book veers into a truly unpleasant storyline.

Ignoring all that he has done with the character of Starling to this point, Harris has her improbably fall under Lecter's spell and continues the earlier device of making Lecter a sympathetic character. It simply doesn't work, and the storyline reads more like a bad Hollywood movie — implausible and somewhat misogynistic in its cavalier treatment of what had been such a strong female character — than the taut, intelligent thriller one has come to expect from a writer of Harris's caliber.

Hannibal is a huge disappointment — not because it's not the book I wanted, but because of its disturbing subtexts, which are disturbing for all the wrong reasons. A monster such as Lecter shouldn't be set up as a sympathetic character, and Harris should have played fair with Starling, instead of twisting her so out of character simply to provide a "shock" ending.

Because of the scheduling of these columns, this review will come too late to save the money of those who, like me, paid the big

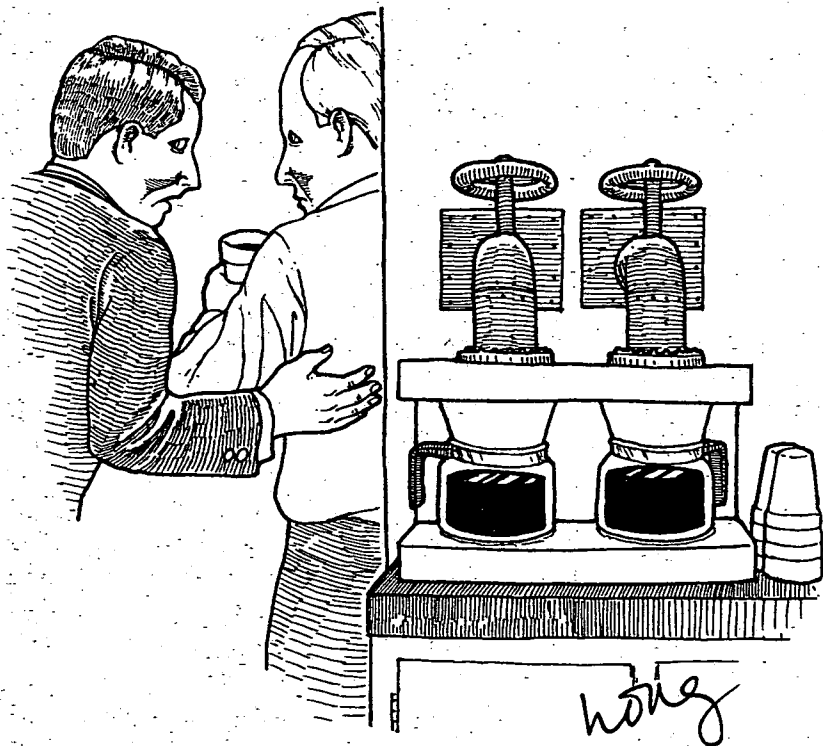
bucks for the hardcover. But perhaps it might give fair warning to those of you waiting to buy the paperback edition: Don't bother.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be

sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2. ¶

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"Where are we dumping the sludge?"



BOOKS

ELIZABETH HAND

Mr. X, by Peter Straub, Random House, 1999, \$25.95.

Pork Pie Hat, by Peter Straub, Orion Books (London), 1999, £6.99.

Peter and PTR: Two Deleted Prefaces and an Introduction, by Peter Straub, Subterranean Press, P.O. Box 190106, Burton, MI 48519, 1999, \$10 (includes shipping).

DYING IS easy. Comedy is hard. Writing a halfway decent, full-length horror novel is really, *really* hard. Despite the prevalence of books by Stephen King, Anne Rice, Dean R. Koontz, Dan Simmons, and yes, Peter Straub, the number of truly fine supernatural novels produced in the last twenty or so years can probably be counted upon one hand, maybe two, if you're minus a finger like the guy in *The 39 Steps*. I would name these books as follows: *The Girl in a Swing*, by Richard Adams;

The Vampire Lestat, by Anne Rice; *Falling Angel*, William Hjortsberg; *Bag of Bones*, Stephen King; *Signs of Life*, M. John Harrison; *Flicker*, Theodore Roszak; *Beauty*, Brian D'Amato; *The Owl Service*, by Alan Garner; *The Prestige*, by Christopher Priest (a novel some critics have insisted is really sf); and now Peter Straub's *Mr. X*.

Obviously any list of this type is going to be subjective, and I have already stuffed cotton in my ears against the wails of those multitudes who have insulated their homes with paperback editions of *The Stand*. To be even more subjective, I'll state here that of these novels, perhaps only *The Girl in a Swing* and *Signs of Life* could stand with the very best supernatural tales ever written, and this is quite a feat because those other, truly great tales are not novels at all but shorter works. *Mr. X* comes very, very close, yet doesn't quite make the cut, but Straub's *Pork Pie Hat*, a novella specially commissioned for a U.K.

series called the Criminal Records series, ranks right up there with the likes of Oliver Onions's "The Beckoning Fair One" and Marion Crawford's "The Screaming Skull" and Robert Aickman's "Ringing the Changes."

In supernatural fiction, as in life, size matters; but Big is rarely — if ever — Better.

The ideal length for a supernatural story is probably that of the novella, or novelet (very occasionally the noveleeny); short stories are too, well, *short*. A notable (very) short exception is William Harvey's "August Heat," and there are others, including quite a few by Saki and, of course, W. W. Jacobs's "The Monkey's Paw"; but the very greatest and most influential horror story ever written is a short novel, "Heart of Darkness" by Joseph Conrad, and I would name as runners-up two other novellas, Arthur Machen's "The Great God Pan" and "The White People."

Perspicacious readers will note that most of these tales have a somewhat musty ancestry, even if they don't quite fit into the classic antiquarian mode epitomized by the works of M. R. James. Again, this is very much a matter of taste, but it reflects I think a genuinely declining taste for what I still consider

ghost stories: even the goriest and most successful of them remain ghost stories in their deepest darkest hearts, and even the most successful of them are probably going the way of the Edsel, silent films, vinyl recordings, and network television. Movies spoiled written horror by setting up a model of escalating expectations and diminishing returns: Written horror set about to imitate its more popular younger sibling, with the end result being an entire demonic stepfamily right out of a John Waters movie by way of John Shirley, a lot of noise and flash but very little in the way of a genuine *frisson* of fear: Doctor Terror's House of Hubbub.

And yet, and yet — and yet despite all of this, good supernatural books get written, and sometimes great ones. Peter Straub's *Ghost Story* was one of the former. A trope on Machen's "The Great God Pan" (which also inspired M. John Harrison's very fine *The Course of the Heart*), *Ghost Story* was an elegant, elegiacal book that honored not just its immediate source material but the entire tradition of formalist, primarily English, ghost stories. Ultimately it collapsed under the weight of so many traditions — revenants, shapeshifters, succubi, paranormal

children — but *Ghost Story* was a huge commercial success that did not hide its more highbrow literary ambitions and influences — not just Machen but Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry James, Edith Wharton. The eight novels Straub has written since then (one, *The Talisman*, with Stephen King) have cemented Straub's reputation as our finest supernatural stylist, and have as well continued to occupy enviable positions on the bestseller lists.

Mr. X is better than any of his previous books, including *Ghost Story*: a thrilling tour de force as beautifully and intricately constructed as a Rolls Royce Silver Cloud. It is a tale of doppelgängers, like Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and Christopher Priest's *The Prestige*. Unlike those books, Straub's is a wholly American tale, one that feels entirely new. Its setting is not the lushly rotting vistas of Southern gothic writers like Faulkner or Anne Rice or Flannery O'Connor, though there are powerful southern influences at work; nor is it the even more familiar New England neo-noir that has become North America's backyard boneyard, thanks to the work of Stephen King, Algernon Blackwood (okay, "The Wendigo" is set in Canada, but close

enough), Thomas Tryon, and H. P. Lovecraft. *Mr. X* is set in a Southern Illinois town called Edgerton. A small city that becomes as populous and memorable as Arkham or Dunwich or Castle Rock, Edgerton is quite simply one of the most wonderfully realized places in fantastic literature, right up there with Edgewood in John Crowley's *Little, Big*, or Stephen King's Derry, Maine. The characters in *Mr. X* are various and complex (at least one of them is both various and complex all by himself), but all of them seem sprung from Edgerton as from some brilliantly colored, hypnotically churning whirlpool, and at the novel's end it is Edgerton that stains your dreams, as much as any of its populace.

The tale opens with Ned Dunstan hitchhiking back to Edgerton to see his mother, Valerie (known as Star), who is dying. Ned is a few days away from his thirty-fifth birthday, an event he is not looking forward to. Since he was three years old, Ned's birthdays have been marked by a series of terrifying apparitions of a murderous figure he thinks of as *Mr. X*. To his adopted families — Star put her son into foster care at birth — Ned's experiences appear as seizures; but to Ned (and the reader) they are utterly real. Also preternaturally

real is Ned's lifelong sense of an Other, a shadow-self that may or may not be linked to Mr. X. When Star dies in hospital, Ned's stay in Edgerton is extended so that he can attend the funeral. This gives him the chance to spend some more time with Star's eccentric great-aunts and their hangers-on, a family that puts various Snopeses, Addamses, and Starkadders to shame. What Anne Rice's vampires are to New Orleans, the Dunstons are to Edgerton, but I would not bet on Lestat winning out over Great-Aunt Joy, whether or not her sweet potato pie was on the menu that night.

Ned's enforced stay also sends him in search of his biological father, who turns out to have more in common with H. P. Lovecraft than one might desire in a paterfamilias. Lovecraft casts a long and complicated and mordantly funny shadow over both Mr. X, the novel, as well as Mr. X, the nasty guy in the black hat. We learn early on that the youthful X has been vouchsafed his powers by mysterious figures he believes are gods; when a copy of *The Dunwich Horror* falls into his bloodstained hands, he realizes they are, in fact, his ancestors. "The Providence Master" becomes his spiritual mentor, to the extent that the young X embroiders his stagger-

ingly successful life of crime with a few tatty artistic threads — the horrible, horribly bad stories collected in a self-published collection titled *From Beyond: Tales of the Unknown* by Edward Rhinehart. In Mr. X's single funniest sequence, Ned Dunstan reads from a bit of his father's work —

"Darkness over Ephraim's Landing" ended with this sentence: "As the bells of St. Arnulf's chimed, I burst upon the sacrosanct chamber and by the flickering light of my upraised candle glimpsed the frothing monstrosity which had once been Fulton Chambers crawl, with hideous alacrity, into the drain!"

Mr. X becomes more and more complex — Byzantine, labyrinthine, dizzying — as it nears its close. The shadow-selves multiply, along with clues to identity, until the reader finds herself gazing into a hall of mirrors, dazzled. And in its final sentence, Mr. X leaves one with the sense that yet another face, shadowy, hitherto unseen, awaits in the gathering darkness.

If Mr. X is wonderful, *Pork Pie Hat* is just about perfect. Hat, a legendary jazz musician (modeled

on Lester Young), gives a nightlong interview to a young graduate student. Years later, after Hat has died, the student extracts one tale from the tapes and presents it here: a Halloween story of very real malevolence and power, whose true meaning, again, becomes evident only in *Pork Pie Hat's* last pages. The supernatural overtones are ambiguous (as in "Heart of Darkness") and ultimately irrelevant. *Pork Pie Hat* may be a slender volume, but it is not a minor work: fluid, elegant, haunting; its seventy-three pages pack more genuine terror than nine-tenths of what passes for horror fiction these days.

"Most people will tell you growing up means you stop believing in Halloween things

— I'm telling you the reverse. You start to grow up when you understand that the stuff that scares you is part of the air you breathe."

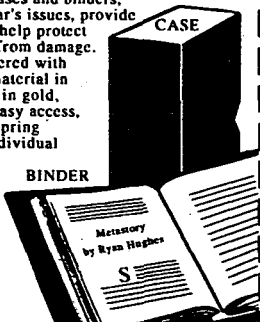
Finally, *Peter and PTR: Two Deleted Prefaces and an Introduction*, is a small press pamphlet containing just those things. It sheds a few more rays upon *Mr. X*, both its genesis and execution, as well as adding a few more pages to the oeuvre of Straub's sometime hagiographer and *bête noire*, Popham College's professor of popular culture, Putney Tyson Ridge. Ridge's commentary upon *Mr. X*, in particular, will be of interest to anyone interested in the eternal tug-of-war between art and academe, substance and shadow. 

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SATISFACTION GUARANTEED

John Whitbourn is a British writer whose seven novels, including *A Dangerous Energy*, *Popes and Phantoms*, and most recently, *Downs-Lord Dawn*, often deal in magical alternate histories. His first story for us also draws heavily on history—in this case, it introduces us to Mary Anning, a woman who was something of a celebrity in her day but is now largely forgotten. She lived and died at Lyme Regis in Devon (the setting of John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*); come along and see—

The Way, the Truth....

By John Whitbourn

Mary Anning, probably the most important unsung (or inadequately sung) collecting force in the history of palaeontology...made an astounding series of discoveries, including squidlike creatures with associated ink-bags, a plesiosaur in 1824, and a pterosaur (flying reptile) in 1828. She directly found, or pointed the way to, nearly every specimen of importance.

—*Finders, Keepers*, Stephen Jay Gould, W.W. Norton & Co., 1992.

“**W**HAT NAME D'YE GIVE
this child?”

There was no love lost between the pastor and Richard Anning, but occasion demanded the baby be handed over. It was accepted with broad, gentle hands. Outwardly, all looked well.

“Mary,” said Anning, as though challenging any to deny it.

The mutton-chopped head loomed over the infant.

“Mary,” the pastor repeated, and paused in thought as he trailed two thick fingers across the font. “So be it. Mary Anning, I baptize ‘ee. In the

name of the Father and the Son and the 'oly Ghost." A watery cross now shone on the smooth and innocent brow.

And, in those same 'oly names, thought the pastor to himself, I curse thee for thy father's sake. May Almighty God's fiery vengeance come down upon 'ee and spare ye a long life in this vale of tears.

The infant, blessed with knowing nothing, said nothing. It lay uncannily still, looking up at the pastor's pale face.

That gaze grew strangely prolonged. He was glad of the excuse to break it. A fleeting black figure distracted at the chapel door. He looked to see but it was gone.

The pastor shook his head, accounting it a mistake, a trick of deceiving light. He had not seen himself, standing in a sea of horrors. It was not possible that he be in two places at once — nor be accompanied by monsters.

Elizabeth Haskins shrieked as the rain drove into every crevice. Even at home she disliked thunder, but in an open field it was like the voice of an angry god.

The equestrian exhibition that was the cause of her presence was given up for lost. Each rider shifted for himself. They hurtled past, a wild mixture of water and noise, making for cover. She knew she must do the same. Her charge was a weakly baby in any case: one chill or cold would finish the job.

Elizabeth attached herself to two others she half recognized. They seemed to know a way to escape the deluge; pointing, shouting each other toward refuge.

A tree loomed out of the downpour, a sheltering elm. Any port in a storm.

The little group found the tree just as the lightning found it — and them. The electric fork stabbed the Earth but they did not see it. Crisped and black, they left the world behind.

Fifteen-month-old Mary survived the hammer blow of Heaven. When they prised her from the stiff dead arms of her nurse, the rescuers found her unconscious but alive. She was revived in warm water and with droplets of (smuggled) brandy. In time those grave little eyes reopened and

so there was a gem of rejoicing and legend extracted from the dung of tragedy.

The pastor came to see the Annings and bestow his blessing. He was frightened, not knowing whether Jehovah had granted or spat upon his prayer.

Once again he looked down into that miraculous gaze — and stepped back. There was new wisdom there and he did not care for too much wisdom.

...but the babe alone survived and soon recovered, and from that time...got better health. The physicians say the shock the Child received must be like that from an electric-fluid machine, thus it may be said that the death of the Nurse was the life of the Child.

—Letter from Elizabeth Haskins's widower,
twenty years after the event.

She had been a dull child before but after this accident she became lively and intelligent, and grew up so.

—Charles Anning, Mary Anning's nephew, writing in 1847.

The pastor's unhealthy hacking cough betrayed him. He announced his own presence on the clifftop better than a master of ceremonies.

Mary Anning knew that rasp well: it punctuated the psalms and scripture and sermons of every Sunday's chapel. She wished to avoid it: then and always. The pastor had taken against her, even more than any other of the "noisy sinful children." She didn't know why and even sought to show repentance — but it did no good. He still glared blackly on her and would cuff her if Richard Anning was not around.

Best of all was to avoid him and glide along, invisible, in the shy, sly, slinking byways of life. Even at the age of ten she was good at that.

Her hunt for "curios" put into respite, she remained low amidst the clifftop brush and knew he would not see her. For the moment he had eyes for one thing only.

Along the new turnpike road the coach and four drew nearer. It looked well laden.

The pastor spoke against the "incomers" most Sundays. He warned

against their manners, their money, the way they talked and most of all their lascivious appearance when they emerged from the bathing-machines. The yearly growing influx of pleasure seekers to Lyme threatened all piety and peace and might even in time extinguish the native Dorset tongue. The pastor told them to boldly speak their own dialect to the rich and lazy incomers — if speak they must.

Mary was sure he was right but there again the grander arrivals were such fun to watch with their funny clothes and speech and manners that it was hard to tear your eyes off them. And if they spoke kindly to you and offered a farthing for directions....

Father sold these "holiday" people the things he made — or else mended what they broke. He could turn his hand to anything in the carpentry line. Then there were the "curios." On Sundays, when the grander Lymians were in the Anglican church, he set up a table outside his shop beside Cockmoil Prison and the incomers would buy some of his finds chipped out of the cliffs and foreshore beds. Without that income things would be even harder....

The coach bypassed the pastor in a rumble of hoofs, its breath raising his last rats-tails of hair. As it went by he raised his fist and thoughts against it and its contents.

Unaware they were being cursed, Jane Austen and her family and all the other passengers continued down into the fashionable seaside resort of Lyme Regis.

We called for a native tradesman, a Mr. Anning — and a Chapel Radical Jacobin if I ever saw one — to repair to the darling little box-lid but I thought his asking price of five shillings beyond the value of all the furniture in our room altogether. I dismissed the rude beast without further ado.

Now I am here I am so longing for balls....

—Jane Austen in correspondence
to her sister, Cassandra. 14th September 1804.

"I am the way, the truth and the life."

The pastor fixed the congregation with a lifetime of experience burning behind his eyes. "Therein be the entirety of the gospels: all else be commentary."

It was a pleasing notion. Richard Anning was partial to complex things put in a nutshell: disparate wood cunningly jointed into a useable whole. He'd been raised on Cromwell's "good old cause" and the Levellers demanding the entirety of the Law shoe-horned into one book, understandable to all. Christianity most appealed to him when it was just God made graspable and "*do as you would be done by.*"

The pastor knew their every little foible. They'd made their way to him in years of confidences and moments of distress. He'd made it his business to know. A shepherd should understand each sheep's plaintive baa.

Richard Anning he could strip bare with just a look. The man was a *radical*, a ringleader rioter in hungry years past. He was fired by grievance, not religion, that peasant anger slow burning since the Conquest. *He* was here because this was not the gentry's church.

The pastor accepted him for his tithe and presence — for he loathed an empty pew — but he *knew* him. The man spited Scripture with his pre-flood "*curios,*" raising *doubts* in those who beheld them. A bad influence he was, a millstone to those who heeded him. His children heeded, that was plain: they listened in love. They were being misled to hell.

Joseph (the eldest) and Mary Anning leaned toward their father: they did not fear. Nothing was as it should be. The pastor disapproved and glared.

"*The way, the truth and the life.*" He said it loud for emphasis and closed the Bible likewise. Sermon ended. The *word* would find God's elect and bounce off the damned. It was not his task to distinguish between them but to shovel out promiscuous salvation. All the same, he knew which was which.

Richard Anning was tossing an idea back and forth. He relished the exercise: there being need for the lower orders to hone their only weapon in life's harsh contest. "*...truth and the life....*" Interesting.

He resisted the temptation to softness: you had to keep a stone in your sling.

"I know another way," he informed his offspring as they filed out, "A way that's hard and treacherous. I'll show you now."

The pastor knew where they were going and cursed their path.

Another, later, Sunday — but much the same. Poverty set an iron pattern on their lives.

Sundays — when they weren't selling them — they went curio hunting. The proceeds of the little table meant meat once a week and thus Joseph's inch or so advantage over his playmates.

Sometimes they watched their father traverse the perilous cliff ways, showing them the safest and the best. Other days — as now — they scoured the low-tide beach, a relaxing holiday from risk.

"There," Richard Anning pointed straight up. "Black Ven: the way, the truth and y' death if ye be not mindful. Her's your best bet — stacked full of curios but she'll have 'ee if ye relax a mite. Climbing her's good but sweetest be when her face crumbles: get to the fall afore the tide and her'll be fuller of curios than a plum pudding is o' currants. But mind ye, old Blackie, she'll be waiting for ye — the half hanging remnants up above, ready to drop on y' bonce like vengeance. She guards her treasures. Leave her to I jus' yet — promise?"

Mary and Joseph confirmed they'd never venture that particular cliff unsupervised.

"Good. The beach has riches enough for ye just now. Follow I and learn."

The morning bled away, an hour of head-down wandering for every find.

"Now, these," he told Mary — she was the more interested, "these be called 'dragon curls.'" The shallow tide water covering the spiraled fossil was brushed aside. "See? They lift easy and take a shine. Mum can do that. You'll get a tuppence for they."

A spell of teaching and then they re-split to search. As in everything else, the Annings went their own way.

Richard was driven, Mary was absorbed: only Joseph could be distracted by the scenery. He straightened up to watch the cliff-top black cortege wind by.

It was the reason they were excused chapel today. Anning wouldn't have the pastor make a hypocrite of him from beyond the grave. The man's funeral could thrive well enough without his insincerity.

A sudden, sharp-edged gust made the three Annings blink. It raised their hats and coats before dispersing over the sand like disapproval.

Richard didn't recall so many twists up Black Ven. According to his reckoning he should be near the top now, yet the path — such as it was — ventured on. Gathering dusk — and fright — made him abandon even the pretense of a fossil search. He was cursed today in any case, his hip bag hanging limp, empty of any salable specimen. Home seemed far away and correspondingly attractive.

He fingertipped his way round a rocky protrusion. It crumbled under his touch like he'd become Samson. The tussocks and loose stones underfoot felt greasy. From nowhere came the desire to just...push, to extend his arms and *push* and fall away, free at last, free from the earth and care, out into the open air.

A voice whispered in his head telling him to...fly — and die. He abused it as not his own — though it sounded like him.

Round that corner was another, even sharper, and the path narrowed further still. The bitter bile of panic was definitely washing round his taut mouth now. He'd never seen or trod this stretch before. Either he'd taken a wrong way or....

"You did!" the pastor answered his unspoken question. "You have!"

He stood barring the way, confident beside the yawning abyss. Having already traversed one great divide, Lyme's cliffs now held no fear. A pocket of frigidity surrounded him.

Anning whimpered but could not avoid those dead eyes. He was confronted with all his errors.

The pastor remained stock still but his cold advanced. It had fingers and enveloped Richard Anning. Gently, grip by grip, surface by surface, it detached him from the cliff.

"Down ye go," said the pastor by way of blessing, "and fare ye well."

Richard went out into the night and had his few seconds of liberty — till Earth came up to embrace him.

It was Joseph Anning who found the "crocodile." Its giant staring head caught his eye at the very edge of the foreshore. But for it being the cusp of the tide he'd not have been that far out. It was God's benevolence. The family had been on the parish ever since their father's death. There'd be a buyer for a big find: maybe an upcountry big-wig making "science" of it — they paid extra well.

Dad had always said look for the "*ar-tic-ulated*" curios: the more stone bones the more pennies. This one looked promising. If that skinny neck was connected....

It would be a race. The thing was already half an inch deep in sand and water. Mistress tide was on the turn. Joseph got down on his knees and began to scrape.

There was more: its coffin bed of stone was nigh flat — not like those frustrating few that directly dived deep below — it went on — and on.

Joseph spared a second to look into the empty saucer eyes.

"Welcome back to the world, fishy-boy," he lightly told the two hundred million years' deceased. "Now, pardon I but 'tis time for ye to wake." He raised his father's chisel.

The back of his neck froze. Ice descended on it from on high. He clapped up an involuntary hand. The flesh there was corpse cold.

He was going to mark his find anyway, to align it with some shore feature so it could be found again. There was no shame in standing to turn and confront the great fear that had draped itself upon him. It was just possible there might be a madman behind him, sneaking silent up with evil intent.

In a way there was. He knew the distant black figure upon the cliff. He knew its name and opinion.

Joseph turned again. There was enough of his father in him to protest.

"T'ain't none of your business. Not no more. 'Tis ours."

Then the coldness was coming off the water like an incoming fog. The pastor had moved from clifftop to sea and now stood upon — and against — the tide. Joseph could feel him, could glimpse his floating gaitered feet, but he would not look up. He'd reached the extent of his defiance.

The slab feet stepped forward, propelling Joseph one pace back. The cold and hatred were like awaking in a winter grave.

Two more steps, in swift succession, and he had relinquished the fossil.

With it — and all it might mean for the family in food and fuel and rent — went the last of his resistance. He somehow knew that the pastor was preparing to *tell* him things. He could not bear to hear them. He ran.

The chill beach was left to the dead.

Soon after Joseph signed papers to become an upholsterer's apprentice. It was steady money.

He told all to Mary, now a sturdy, plain little eleven-year-old — and told it with a warning. Thereafter, she hunted alone.

IT TOOK NIGH on a year, but she succeeded.

Joseph had given good directions but he'd not venture on the beach again. He had his head buried in the gentry's sofas. Mary had commanded and cajoled, but his mind was set as hard as the fossil she sought. His experience had put years on him and glass behind his eyes. He'd sketch her a map but no more.

So, there was a year of paddling about on the turn of tide, a year of wet dresses and salt rash and her mother's reproaches. A twelve-year-old girl's laboring wages weren't much to lose but they were something. Mary had endured all, stony faced, and God was now pleased to reward her.

The sand was scoured off it by a brisk receding tide. She doubted it would ever be plainer than today. Her practiced eye discerned its full extent, twenty feet or more from giant head to snaky tail. And were they four flippers splayed out at the sides? This was something new and wondrousome.

She paused, focusing on the now harmless rows of teeth. It had once been ravenous, relentless. Those blank eye sockets had looked out upon a cold and...devouring age, somewhen unrecorded in Scripture. It was a monster from a monstrous time now revealed to her in stone. She was teetering over a chasm back into time. The thought froze her.

Mary shook off the silliness. First and foremost this thing was *money* — and salvation from parish charity. Her father's hammer and chisel came out of his battered curio bag.

The sand shifted under her feet — a tiny motion but enough for pause to her attuned senses. She was wary of the tide that curled quiet in behind her, the cliff waiting to fall on her head. They betrayed their murderous intent with subtle heraldings.

Mary wrenched her hope from off the beach. She almost wished it was only the sea come to thwart her.

He had been withholding his presence. Released, it chilled to the bone. She clenched her eyes, clenched her bladder. He was standing very close.

She'd always quailed under his gaze even when he was alive. Now it was also indecent just to behold him.

The grave had not been kind. His flesh was waxy; the mutton-chops false looking. That familiar stare came from somewhere far away and awful.

"Wicked child," he hissed. "Desist!" His breath smelt moss-tinged and decaying.

Deep within, some other Mary was crushed and whimpering on the sand, or else a little girl running home. Those possibilities were ignored — scathingly ignored — in favor of the victorious and sinned-against whole.

"Why?" she challenged him — and looked him in the eye. He was not used to that — in life or now.

What was left was not up to rational debate. There remained only fixed opinions.

"Blasphemy!" he told her — and pointed at the fossil.

"No!" she answered. "Pennies! Food!"

The pastor drew in breath he did not need, nostrils and dead eyes flaring alike. There was a flame in them that was not his own.

"Thirty pieces of silver!"

Mary did not grasp the reference. Dame and Sunday school had largely washed over her: she'd been too tired.

"Maybe," she replied in a voice that was hope-touched. "Pounds and pounds maybe!"

He paused. She looked. Could sympathy at last have entered him — saved up until the afterlife?

Obviously not.

"The faithful dead condemn you," he said, a whispered fury trembling his big frame. "They rise to condemn you!"

With a gesture he exhumed the beach-buried dead: the shipwrecked sailors, the paupers and murders, the infanticides of all the ages. They rose like levers from their shallow scooped graves and, as one, regarded her with the remains left to them.

Mary had not eaten breakfast (there was none) — and that was as well. She'd been unaware Lyme beach was so replete with death.

They looked at her and she at them. There was horror and weariness

and pain — but she did not discern condemnation. Their grievance was not with her but myriad, individual, others. The pastor had raised an unwilling conscript army. Mary stood her ground. His shot had misfired.

He realized it and swept the dead back into decent concealment. He seemed at a loss — and desperate enough to reason.

"Consider, child," the kindness failed even to convince himself, "the past you would unleash...."

Suddenly he was surrounded by new monsters; not the vestigially human ones of a moment before but a flapping, snapping, reptilian host, kith and kin of the "crocodile" at Mary's feet.

They swam about him in the invisible water of another age. They were soulless and devoured each other: constantly: horribly. Mary, who knew all about just where her food came from, was still repelled.

"Do ye prefer *this*," he indicated the mindless feeding frenzy all around, "to the reforming beauty of Scripture? Would ye drag this forgotten Godlessness to today?"

Mary wavered. She had a good heart. She didn't want to be a cause for ill.

The point was hammered home with passion.

"Would ye be recalled as the Mother of all *Doubt*?"

All she wanted was freedom from want, for herself and her family. She wanted an end to patched dresses and street taunts. But Mary Anning wouldn't buy those regardless of cost.

The tide was turning; for the first time she noticed that her boots were inundated.

The pastor rode high above both sea and uncertainty.

"He is the way, the truth and the life! No other wisdom is necessary."

Mary wavered. The chill of the water joined that of her company. Her hammer and chisel felt like weapons.

"Satan's child: do not risk another thunderbolt!"

She knew that story as well as he. She'd never understood it till today. The little she had been touched by Providence.

Then, as she moved to stow her tools, there came that touch again. Lightning had struck twice: a second bolt: another blinding flash — this time purely internal: just as searing but entirely benign.

"The way, the *truth* and the life," an inner voice told her. It was both hers — and another's. It was God-like: all-consuming.

The backwash touched the pastor also. He understood — and understood all too well.

His face was twisted with disappointment. He wept. For the first time Mary pitied him.

"Betrayed!" he howled. "*Betrayed!*" — his last words. Then he — and his fears and visions — were snuffed out. He was taken away to learn — in love.

Mary Anning shook her head. She too understood — and understood the truth. She'd been told that truth was best and — with faith — *for* the best. All else was commentary.

Eleven-year-old Mary Anning took up her tools and began to dig.

POSTSCRIPT

...It is certainly a wonderful instance of divine favour — that this poor, ignorant girl should be so blessed, for by reading and application she has arrived to that degree of knowledge as to be in the habit of writing and talking with professors and other clever men on the subject, and they all acknowledge that she understands more of the science than anyone else in the kingdom.

—Lady Silvester. 17th September 1824.

Henry Henley, Lord of Lyme Manor, paid Mary £23 — a year's income to the Annings — for her Ichthyosaur when it was eventually raised, intact, from the Dorset Lias. It may now be seen in an honored place in the Natural History Museum in London. Mary went on to become one of the founding mothers of the science of paleontology.

The facts are as I've recounted them. All else is (my) commentary....



For the winter solstice this year, we thought you deserved a very serious and sober meditation on the meaning of the holidays...but instead we chose to give you this lighthearted gift.

The Vampires Who Saved Christmas

By S. N. Dyer

“**I** THINK,” SAID VLAD, “THAT there is nothing lonelier than to be a vampire on Christmas Eve.”

We all nodded agreement, and not just because he was the Master.

“Everything so festive and bright, holy symbols everywhere. Every-one home with their families, full to revulsion with Christmas cheer.” He shuddered.

“Yeah,” said Larry. “Even the drunks are in shelters, drinking in the holiday spirit. You just can’t get a meal anywhere.”

“Come on,” I said. I was only a year undead, and hesitant to speak out in such august company, but on this evening they seemed inclined to be kindly toward youth. “It’s not so easy for mortals either. I was a single Jewish woman without family — for me, Christmas was a complete drag. No stores open, no restaurants or movies. Nothing at all to do...”

“Except wander the streets looking for Chinese takeout, and become someone else’s dinner?” Vlad asked teasingly, and pinched my cheek. He’d been lonely that night too.

"You know what I hate the most about Christmas?" asked Mr. Bronze.

We looked at him respectfully, even the Master. Mr. Bronze was, after all, older than all of us together. He could complain authoritatively about the loneliness of a stranger in Athens during the Eleusian Mysteries, in ancient Baghdad during Ramadan, in Rome at Saturnalia, in China at New Year, in the Cave of the Old Ones at the Feast of the Great Bear.... He had been an outsider throughout recorded human history and long before.

We waited expectantly.

"What I hate most," said Mr. Bronze, "is those darn reruns of *It's a Wonderful Life*."

Vlad passed around chilled AB negative — you just can't get fresh blood on Christmas — and we waited for Larry to start the videos.

"Oh no!" Larry cried, and cringed. He remembered the old days, when the Master was given to fits of temper. Before the Twentieth Century, with its psychoanalysis, behaviorism, and rebirthing therapy. But mostly, before the Master took to hunting in neighborhoods where most of the blood was enriched with Prozac, with just a soupçon of Xanax.

"What's wrong?" we asked. We hoped he hadn't brought vampire movies, a prank which had previously cost him two months locked in his coffin without dinner. The Master hated vampire movies — not only for the sheer defamation of character, but because he thought he should be getting residuals. (Though we did all have a sneaking fondness for *Love at First Bite*.)

"My videos! Look!" Larry hit the on button, and a black and white movie began. *Miracle on 34th Street*!

"That was supposed to be *Fellini's Satyricon*," Larry wailed. He began to rip open the other boxes. "And this was supposed to be *PeeWee's Big Adventure*, and this was — ouch!" He dropped the cassette, fingers sizzling.

"Not *The Greatest Story Ever Told*?" Lila asked sympathetically. Larry sprinted to the kitchen to run cold water over his hand.

The Master sighed, and leaned back in his chair. We could hear carols drifting up from the apartment below. "Well, on the bright side," he remarked, "some other loving family has our movies."

So we did what all vampires eventually wind up doing on Christmas Eve, unless they plan ahead. We set out for Blockbuster Video.

The streets of Christmas Eve were as I remembered them from life: deserted. Store windows still shone brightly, luring you to the impending retail bacchanalia. Luckily there were not many frankly religious displays to make us ill, but the nondenominational splendor of trees and Santas was still enough to inspire queasiness, or at least angst.

A cheery mortal couple rushed by, arms clutching presents. My mouth watered. I was hungry.

"No, young one," whispered Vlad, a restraining hand upon my arm. "You wouldn't like the taste." I'd been told. Next to sheer religious fervor, nothing quite spoils the bouquet as much as hope, merriment, and visions of sugar plums.

We paused before a toy store window. A lifesize animated Santa waved from a sleigh overflowing with gifts.

"Hmmpf," said Mr. Bronze. "Doesn't look a bit like him."

Then we heard the sound of childish voices raised in song. Jingle Bells, luckily. After a month of a steady onslaught of *Silent Night*, I was ready to go berserk if I heard it again.

The building opposite was well lit and busy, and nauseating odors of turkey, ham, and holiday cheer wafted out every time the door opened.

"They've turned it into a shelter for homeless families," said Mr. Bronze. He liked to keep up with the news. "After dinner, they're going to give presents to all the children. Not just donated or repaired toys, either... They're all going to get the hottest items."

We nodded. The media-blitz toys, not so special except in their lurid scarceness. *Bermuda Barbie*, dressed for Christmas at Club Med. Auctioned for \$2000 each in the want ads. And *GI Santa*... Last week, two fathers had beaten each other into intensive care for the last one on the shelves at FAO Schwartz. The little homeless children were to be the recipients of a fortune in trendy toys. And afterward, the shelter workers would offer the homeless parents \$20 and steal home with the treasure. But it was the thought that counted.

The off-tune chirpy voices began mangling *Good King Wenceslas*.

"Oh, can we peek at them?" Lila pleaded. "Please, Master, they sound adorable."

Vlad smiled, and shrugged. "Sure." We hurried across the street

eagerly. Vampires are like that, sentimental. Human children strike us as, well, just so cutè. You know, like 4H future farmers and their lambs and calves.

We stared in the window, making ourselves insubstantial so no one would try to drag us inside to feed or bless us. That happened once to Vlad's vampiric son Arnie, and the Master still told the story as a cautionary tale to baby vampires.

It would have been a heartwarming sight were we not, of course, coldblooded. There were the unkempt starving parents and children, staring hopefully at the food, and the tree, and the Santas.

"Hey," hissed Rhonda. She didn't talk much, but she was an excellent huntress, trained before death by seeking bargains at Bloomies. "Do you smell it?"

We did. Fresh blood, on the hoof. Avaricious, evil blood, devoid of holiday cheer.

Rhonda beckoned, and we followed, Mr. Bronze and the Master taking the rear with the caution of centuries. We trailed along the side of the building and found a door propped open. Inside was a room full of expensive toys, and several masked men stuffing them into sacks. Bizarro Santa Clauses, taking presents from the good little children.

We looked at the Master and he smiled indulgently. "Go ahead, my children."

So we fell upon the thieves, grabbing them before they could make a sound. We abandoned the bags of loot to be found by the shelter Santas, who would conclude that the thieves had been overcome, not by superhumanly strong vampires, but by Christmas spirit.

And we took the thieves home and had a wonderful feast, drinking way too much until there was nothing left except empty husks to be stuffed into trash bags and dumped later. Afterward we sat gorged before a blazing fire and reminisced about previous feasts.

Then Vlad looked at me and said, "It's almost sunrise, time for all young vampires to go to bed." And I curled up snugly and thought that nothing was quite so pleasant as a holiday meal with your family, when I heard a sudden clatter on the roof and sprang up so quickly that I hit my head on the lid of my coffin, before I realized that it was only Larry and Mr. Bronze, flying the trash to Jersey. ♣

Rand Lee's last appearance here was "The Green Man" back in August of 1997. He has been at work on several projects in the meantime, including a fantasy for young readers entitled The Morning Knight and a murder mystery set in the same universe as the following science fiction story. Rand lives in New Mexico and finishes stories much too infrequently.

Tales from the Net: The Prince of Love

By Rand B. Lee

IS IT NOT, OH CHILD OF sloth, an admirable thing, that although we are an information network capable of cross-referencing and self-repair in much less time than it takes your right big toe to tell your brain that you have stepped on a sharp object, we do not feel superior to less agile mentalities? And is it not a wonder, oh marvel of hominid development, that despite your outburst of 0945 GMT Terran hours, to wit, "That stupid Net thinks it knows everything," we are incapable of bearing you ill will — since we have no "will," existing solely to serve and, in fact (to speak metaphorically) eager to do so?

If asked, however, we might venture to remark that focusing upon the consciousness-level of To Blame is not a practice conducive to harmony and expansion in Physical Reality; and if asked, we might suggest that you turn your considerable (if juvenile) bihemispheric capacities to more assiduous contemplation of your current databit portions (i.e., homework assignments).

Having stated this, oh spawn of knuckle-walkers, we remind you that

if you truly desire to escape our tutelage, all that is necessary is to activate via voice-command your electronic privacy prerogative as provided for in the Electronic Privacy Act of 2027, upgraded for the current DataNet series March 11, 2151.

Having informed you of your rights as required by law, we urge you back to the task at hand: study of the early historical contacts between sentient species *Homo sapiens sapiens* and *Astronauta tyegoolagongensis*, that is, the Human Race and the Damanakippith/fy.

You will find our next lesson cross-referenced under CO-DEPENDENCY: EXOMANIC; PSYCHOLOGY: INTERSPECIES BONDING AND BOUNDARY STRUCTURES; ZIOMEK, NANDI, and DAMANAKIPPITH/FY.

A HOMECOMING

The knock comes in the middle of the night, downstairs at Old Man Ziomek's door. He has the sort of door that needs to be knocked, which shows you what an odd old man he is, and suggests his rural habitation. No shineystone walls, here: just four hundred winters' worth of sagging farmhouse, built of oak (remember oak?) and roofed with shingles, not solar filament. Hearing the knock, wondering who it can be, the old man sighs, as his house does some stormy nights, and some still nights, too, when there are no visitors but crickets (remember crickets?).

He swings his good leg out of bed first. No semisentient body-conforming matrices; just a bed: vegetable-fiber mattress, metal box-springs, cherrywood frame like old blood under the moon (remember cherrywood?). The bed creaks with Ziomek's shifting weight. The other leg, the bad, dead leg, the one that ends in a stump above the knee (these events take place before the perfection of limb regeneration was possible and biomechanics popular), only comes out of the bed when the old man has gotten some crutches (look it up) under his armpits. The old man swings himself upright on the crutches and heads across the room in the dark. The knock sounds again, and with it a voice: "Dad?"

Old Man Ziomek stiffens and stops where he is. He does not know what to do. He has not cleaned the house; he has not cooked anything, he has forgotten completely that today was the day his son was

supposed to arrive for his last visit home before the unimaginable.

He stumps to the bedroom door and opens it. In the hall, the palings of the banister gleam bonelike in the nightshine from an open window. He stumps around to the staircase, then down, one step at a time, treacherous steps for a man on crutches, steps built for young unfettered feet to dart up and down. "Dad?" A third knock, perhaps a fourth. "Are you awake?" It is taking longer than the old man has expected to negotiate the stairwell. His leg and crutches do not seem to want to descend any farther. So he stops to rest, calling out in his strongest tone, "I'm coming!" His voice splinters in the stairway's dark air, and the shadows suck it up.

Memory: five-year-old Nandi standing before him in the Immigration Reception terminal, fresh from early childhood in some God-forsaken British hellhole, thin arms and legs and grave ancient eyes, hands at the sides: "Hello, Father." It takes Ziomek two years to teach the boy to call him "Daddy." And when the child says it for the first time, it is as though the word were a dead fish he was holding gingerly between thumb and forefinger.

"I'm coming!" cries the old man. "Just wait!" He wishes now he had allowed the Net people to install an interface in the bedroom, so he could communicate with visitors without having to get up, but he hates the Net; it reminds him how old he is. He attains the second floor landing, rounds the banister. Another series of knocks: "Dad? Are you awake?" His son's voice reverberates through the house. It occurs to the old man that there is a nervous note in it.

By the time Ziomek reaches the ground floor living room, the knocking has ceased and he is out of breath. Paintings, pictures, bric-a-brac, and stacked books crowd around him in the blackness, watching his laboring chest with the respectful silence of the similarly aged. He thinks, *Perhaps Nandi has gone away and will not come back.* "I'm almost there!" he cries, and pushes himself to the door.

"All right, Dad," comes the reply, and he nearly sags with relief.

He puts his hand to the door-locks. He thumbs the first plate; the second; the third. The door, still closed, is now freed for opening. He takes several steps backward and braces himself on the padded back of the antique couch. He bawls with all his strength: "Come in! Come in!" He holds his breath.

The door swings inward. Nandi fills the frame, Nandi his son, seven feet tall and absolutely blue-black-skinned, blacker than the tree-scented summer night. Ziomek's heart jumps, swells, spills over. Nandi's face is furrowed with concern. He sets down a piece of luggage on the floor. "I knocked forever. Why are the lights off? Are you all right?"

Ziomek laughs in terror. "It's the middle of the night. The light hurts my eyes. I was asleep."

Nandi throws back his head and laughs in *basso*. "Of course you were asleep. I keep forgetting the time differences. Oh, Dad, it's good to see you." He enfolds his father in big dark arms.

Memories: Nandi's first cautious steps upon green grass; his eyes bugging out at the sight of Particle Accelerator, the nanny-goat, giving birth; Nandi planting beans by hand in a summer field; sixteen-year-old Nandi drunk on red pepper wine, shouting one moment and sullen the next; Nandi standing on the steps of the tube station, luggage at his feet, turning to wave at his father before he ascends to the platform and the great wide world beyond.

Then, the beginning of sorrows: Nandi at university graduate school receiving the Arturo E. Gonzales Award In Linguistic Excellence for his paper, "Anomalous Damanakippith/fy Pseudoverb Stringing;" Nandi's excited Net call upon his appointment to the Extraterrestrial Affairs Commission; and their argument; Nandi's dogged laserfaxes from the Interspecies Contact Station out near Titan; Nandi's news that the Damanakippith/fy had chosen him as one of a hundred Companions who would return to their vast skipper-ship to live with them as part of their Family. "For how long?" Ziomek asked. "Maybe a long time," Nandi replied. Meaning forever.

They disengage, all but one hand, which Ziomek clings to and turning, drags after him toward the kitchen, talking all the while. "You seem taller," he says over his shoulder. "What do they feed you on that base? Come in and sit down. Are you hungry? I've got some hoop cheese with spring onions from PartAcc III; I wrapped some in the cooler just for you. Come and sit down. What's the matter?" he adds, for Nandi has stopped moving after only a few steps.

"Dad," Nandi says, "I brought a friend."

Ziomek blinks. And then he sees what has been standing in the

shadows of the foyer, what must have been standing there all the while, watching them paw one another. The Creature is taller than Nandi. It is furred, shaped like a Human with overtones of horse, or rather centaur: two wiry arms, elbowed in the Human way; a muscular, nippleless barrel chest narrower than its waist; shoulders very broad, almost ludicrously so; hips flaring, wide-pelvised, almost haunchlike, with big muscular legs oddly kneed. Its fur is dark gray, but even in the shadows it is full of half-hidden silver: There are great sweeping curves of it, gleaming and sliding over slabs of muscle, some of it long and silky, some of it dense and short, like velvet pile. Whatever might show between its legs is hidden by what looks like a finely tooled leather equipment belt, complete with apron front and back. Its bigspreading nailless feet are sandaled in the same tooled leather.

"Oh," says the old man. Its skull is more rounded than that of a Human and framed in a cloud of the finest imaginable silver hair, the famous Damanakippith/fy "halo." Silver velvet furs the face, with darker gray on the cheeks and forehead (*A cosmetic?* wonders the old man). Its eyes are mild, moist, warm, and alert, bigger than Human-normal, with a horse's long elegant eyelashes, silvery irises, and bushier fur standing in for eyebrows. Its nose is flat, gray-fleshed, slit-nostriled, mashed-looking. Its mouth is small, gray, and thin-lipped, almost prim but for the fact that it turns up at the corners, which gives it an appealing quality, a relief to the eye after the near-menacing power of the Creature's musculature. It has no visible ears. Its big hands end in five very long, very beautiful nailless fingers.

Of course, he has seen pictures of the Damanakippith/fy, but they have not even remotely prepared him for this.

"Daddy, sorry," murmurs Nandi. His son steps back and reaches up (up!) to place a great black hand in the Creature's silvery shoulder fur. "Dad, I would like you to meet my best friend. His name is Bormwéthu/énene." At the glottal stop halfway through the name, Nandi's right hand flutters near his throat. "In Primary Persona Manafut, it means Bringer of the Correct Equation."

Oh, yes. *Bor-MWAY-thoo* /hand-flutter/*AY-neh-neh*, repeats the old man to himself. *MAHN-ah foot*. Now that his initial shock is past, he remembers his plan, hatched in the small hours of the night since the

arrival of Nandi's latest news. *I must behave perfectly*, he thinks. *Everything depends upon it*. He clears his throat and faces the Creature, forcing himself to meet the Creature's calm eyes. "Greetings, friend of my son," he says formally in English, and then, translating slowly, hands moving laboriously, "*P'/p'/p'/tyensti-mlelet Nem/ene*," the D'/fy equivalent.

Nandi's jaw drops. The D'/fy does not move or reply at first. It stands quiet, huge in the hallway, as though paused to consider a course of action. Heart racing, the old man thinks, *Oh, God, I got it wrong; I got it wrong, oh, God*. Then it opens its mouth and, eyes glowing with warmth, says in English, "Greetings, father of my friend." Its voice is like its fur: rich and silvered, a surprising tenor, like the old man's voice, with muscle underneath it like the son's. Its "F"s sound a bit like "V"s in Ziomek's ears. Now the old man can detect a fragrance from the Creature's skin, very faint and elusive, like rain. He waits fearfully for it to say something else, something in Manafut, which he will not understand, but it does not, as though it knows and does not wish to embarrass him.

Nandi says, "Dad, that was beautiful! Where did you learn —"

"Your farm is an exquisite being," says the Creature. It speaks as though tasting the words as they come out of its mouth, and its eyes are full of wonder. "It sleeps with great courage, here in the night." It looks to Nandi and breaks into a glittering phrase in Manafut. Nandi replies. It regards the old man again. "Not courage. Encouragement. Enthusiasm. Your farm sleeps with much enthusiasm here in the night. It dreams in exuberant layers. There are so many dreams here! In Sidney, there are as many, but they are not as layered. On our ship, there were few dreams of any kind; we had grown too much awake." A whisker of sadness. "But since your people have permitted us to approach to you, to walk with you, there are very many dreams again. We are grateful to the twelfth power. We are grateful forever."

Silence falls. The old man realizes he has been holding his breath against the Creature's charm. *Not charm*, thinks the old man. *Glamour*. The Creature has glamour in the old sense of the word, "enchantment." But he must answer; politeness demands it. With an effort he says, "*Stim#lele*," crossing his hands above his genitals halfway through the word. Nandi is smiling broadly. The Creature's expression does not change; it continues to observe him with its huge eyes. *I must have*

messed up the mode, he thinks. Trying to be casual, he smiles and says to the alien, "It's good to have you here. I know you folks like to sleep outside when you're on Earth, so feel free to bunk down wherever you feel comfortable." To his son he says, "Your room hasn't moved and neither has that big bed of yours. Linen's where it always is." To them both he says, "And now if you young people will forgive me, I'd better head off to bed before I drop where I stand."

Nandi murmurs endearments and apologies; the alien lowers its eyes, bows slightly, and takes three steps backward. And the old man turns and wades through the night-stuffed sitting room toward the foot of the empty stair.

ABLUTIONS

When he awakens, from a peculiar, distasteful dream about hunting a worm which has gotten into the cowbarn, the strength of the sunlight pushing through his bedroom window alerts him to the lateness of the morning. There is nobody in the portion of the yard he can view from his window, no sound from the animals, no movement in the house. His heart flares in fear that his son has left already. As quickly as his crutches will allow, he hurries through his ablutions and down the stairs.

He finds them in the heirloom vegetable garden, standing in the waist-high corn side by side with their arms entwined, like lovers. His son has shed his shirt and gleams ebony in the Pennsylvania forenoon; the Creature, by contrast, is an almost blinding silver. They are silent, black and silver, looking north across the Hopi Blue corn and the Montezuma Red beans and the Costata Romana zucchini and the Old German tomatoes toward the industriously turning windmill.

The moment he lays eyes on them, Old Man Ziomek knows that no matter what he does, no matter what he says, he will never again hold the place in his son's heart that he once held. Lines from William Blake tease Ziomek's memory, flitting away when he tries to grab them. He does not enter the garden, but stands on the grassy verge, waiting for them to notice him, his stomach doing flip-flops, his throat opening and closing like the fist of a reluctant murderer.

It is Bringer of the Correct Equation who stirs first, turning its head

almost 180 degrees to face behind it, as owls do. It utters a few notes in its language. Nandi disengages arms and turns full-body. "Dad," he says, gladly. "It's so beautiful here. I'd forgotten."

The D'/fy says, "Everything is in balance. The soil organisms are fat and lazy. There is an abundance of fatness here."

"Fatness and fatness," agrees the old man grimly. "Not many spreads like this left. No subsoil biomechanics, no genengineered crops. Never have been. Sort of a historical curiosity, I guess."

Nandi looks back at the distant windmill. "When I came here from London when I was a kid, I was afraid of everything. Nobody spoke the way I did. I wasn't used to bare earth, or open sky, or animals, except cats and dogs and rats and roaches." He looks pointedly at his father. "And I wasn't used to adults who neither struck me nor tried to bugger me."

"I know," says Ziomek. *Did you imagine I had forgotten the locks we had Shel put on your door so you could feel safe enough to fall asleep?*

Nandi spreads long-fingered hands to the field. "This place taught me different, Daddy. You taught me different. You taught me a place could have green in it and not devour me."

"Then why did you leave?" blurts Ziomek. Instantly he blushes a deep red and holds up his hands. "Forgive me, son. Stupid; I've been missing you. Of course I know. It wasn't about me; forgive me." He glances nervously at the Damanakippith/fy. "I am proud of my son's achievements." His voice sounds loud in his own ears. The Creature shimmers without moving.

Nandi takes a deep breath, expels it. "Don't apologize. I had to make my own world, Daddy. I never had a world of my own. Just as the D'/fy have never had a world of *their* own. Their Ship wandered for generations, looking for a place to come to rest. They know what homelessness feels like. So do I."

"Yes," says the old man. He looks tenderly at his son. "I never fooled myself about that. I knew I couldn't wipe out your past for you."

He becomes suddenly, keenly aware of the D'/fy, as though the Creature were behind his eyes with him, not as an intruder, but as a friend, an old friend, perhaps the oldest of all friends; an ally, somehow, on his side in the most profound sense. And riding this sensation come the lines from Blake which he has sought, from *Poetical Sketches*:

*"How sweet I roamed from field to field,
And tasted all the summer's pride,
Till I the prince of love beheld,
Who in the sunny beams did glide!"*

No, thinks the old man, appalled. He rips his eyelids open, outraged to feel something he has not felt in a long time: the stirrings of an erection. Trembling with panic, he turns from them and stumbles toward the fence, barely hearing Nandi's "Daddy, what's wrong?" fleeing in jerks on his goddam fucking crutches why the hell didn't I get the leg machine? into the farmhouse, where he sits down in the big stuffed chair and weeps.

A SENTIMENTAL JOURNEY

Sitting in his chair in his parlor, listening to the ticking of the clock (remember clocks?), Old Man Ziomek gives in to despair. Now and then he catches a silver note of Bormwéthu/énene, fluting, or his son's dark rumble. But once again quiet, he finds that the D'/fy is still in his head, that he has not succeeded in ejecting it, that it rests a private silver unobtrusive merciful presence within him, like a statue of Kwan Yin in a temple nook close. He does not have the will to say "No!" to it again.

He remembers the day the farm was acquired. They had met in this very house: Shel, Blue, Ricardo, Mackley, Arden, Thomas, Dolbeare, Ziomek. They were young, but not too young to understand what "home" meant, and their need for it; tired of the world's relentless pace, but not too tired to tackle the task of building their Eden. He alone had experience of agrarian living, coming as he did from a family of farmers, though Mackley was a laboratory plant-breeder and Blue, the Oil Wars veteran, an antique technology specialist.

Shel, the grant writer, outlined the steps they would need to secure longterm funding. Ricardo, the religious historian and novelist, gave a brief survey of communal agrarian cults in North America, and presented his first draft of the *Rules & Regs*. Ziomek presented his working model of the Farm and Mackley explained what antique vegetable varieties were and the commercial viability of growing out existing seed-bank stocks to replace them with fresh material for hybridization and selection. Arden,

the psychologist, explained current extended-family-model theory. Thomas, the social services specialist, offered a range of community involvement ideas, chief among them a revival of the ancient tradition of Summer Camp for urban children. Dolbeare talked art and design. They argued and laughed and drank and, in the fuzzy moist dim hours of the deepest night, became one.

The community had sprouted from the fertile compost of their group passion; flowered into a rollicking noisy happy stand of small research fields and play spaces; rung with the voices of children, most of them temporary visitors but some of them long-term residents, like Nandi. Now the children have grown up and gone and the seed-stocks so carefully nurtured have gone forth into a world just barely snatched back from the dust-bowl. *And we have begun to die*, thinks the old man. *Thomas gone of recombinant cancer; Arden off to lusher academic pastures and a young lover; Dolbeare the darling of the Net, too grand for us; Mackley witless under chemo at County General. Only the four of us left, now: Shel, Blue, Ricardo, and me. And Ricardo barely knows his own name these days.*

It is time, he realizes, to face facts: Nandi will soon be gone forever and he will be alone with his fading cronies and a farm too labor-intensive for them to run themselves, even with the apprentices' help. His great plan, hatched in the secret hours, is laughably impossible. He will simply have to make the best of a bad situation.

Sun and shadow shift. The front door opens, and a tall broad form moves into the living room, blocking out the summer light. Ziomek begins, "Son," then stops.

It is the Creature. It stands on its silver haunches ten feet away and observes him. It says, "The child is young."

"I beg your pardon?" says Old Man Ziomek. His mouth is dry.

"The child is young," the Creature says again. Something in the way it looks at him stirs the old man's memory. *Oh, God*, he thinks. *He's starting one of those damn ritual chain-meditations.* It is, he knows, a Damana-kippith/fy healing technique, a kind of counseling; the D'/fy, it seems, are not immune to depression. *We had grown too much awake*, it has said.

According to the rules he studied by complicht; he can refuse to engage, but something makes him plunge ahead anyway. "The child is

young," he repeats, nodding, pretending ease, though pretense of ease during ritual chain-meditation is a Human affectation, not a D'/fy one. "Children are young, by definition."

"Young is not old, by definition," says the D'/fy.

"Old is not young, by definition," returns the old man.

"'Old' is defined by 'young,'" says the D'/fy.

"'Young' is defined by 'old,'" says Ziomek.

"Define 'old' without using 'young,'" says the alien. It is the First Challenge.

Ziomek licks his lips. The rule is, *Keep talking till you run out of things to say on the subject, staying within the conceptual parameters set by the partner/opponent/tutor.* "Okay. 'Old' is knowing who you are. 'Old' is knowing where you belong. 'Old' is having attained a certain level of attainment and being content to stay there. 'Old' is seeing life in all its detail from the broadest possible viewpoint. 'Old' is acceptance of self." Unconsciously, he sits forward in his chair, a darker vision gripping him, and looks the alien full in the face. "Forget this hygienic shit. 'Old' is being dependent upon others for your sustenance and continued survival. 'Old' is losing control of your body. 'Old' is not being able to get it up. 'Old' is crapping and pissing in your pants."

"Define 'young' without using 'old,'" says the alien. It is the Second Challenge.

"'Young' is being full of impulses with no restraints to channel them," says the farmer to the D'/fy's bottomless eyes. "'Young' is not knowing your capacities. 'Young' is incompleteness of maturation. 'Young' is thinking more of the future than of the past. 'Young' is not appreciating time. 'Young' is the cruelty of ignorance. 'Young' is not thinking you need anything but yourself. 'Young' is Nandi my son." He finds his voice is shaking uncontrollably. It is an old man's voice, without a doubt.

"Define 'son,'" said the alien, "without using 'father.'"

"No, you bastard!" Ziomek is on his feet, shaking his fists at the centaur. "No! A son needs his father! He *does*! How would you people know? You don't even have *dicks*!" He turns, shaking, and totters toward the staircase, his way out and up and into bed and sleep's deep peace (save for the worm). *Well, that's that*, he thinks as he goes. *Your big plan. Ha.* But the Creature is there before him.

"Stop, Ziomek," it says. He stops, his chin level with the place the alien's navel would be if it were human. He looks down at the floor. *Don't touch me, please*, he prays. *Just don't touch me.* "You do not understand my people. We do not understand yours sometimes. Nandi does not understand us as well as he thinks he does, nor does he understand you sometimes, either. I think Nandi must be here and you must tell him your wish."

"So I'm here." His son, behind him somewhere. "What's going on here?" A flash of Manafut from the Creature, and Nandi is on his haunches in front of Ziomek. "Daddy, tell me, for God's sake." The boy's face is raw with emotion. *They strip you of defenses, don't they, these creatures?* thinks the old man. *You can't speak their languages and lie. How long before you forget how to lie? Forget how to mask entirely? No, you will never come back.* When Ziomek is silent, Nandi takes his hands and says, calmly, "Daddy, I know you don't like the D'/fy very much. You think they are taking me away from you. But you don't understand. I can't walk away from this opportunity. It's I, not them. Please, Daddy," and here Nandi's face splinters into tears, "please don't hate them because of me." And he begins to sob, deep, terrible sobs, squatting there on the floor in front of old man Ziomek, who is suddenly embarrassed as hell and very ashamed of himself.

"Get up, Nandi," he says. He pulls at his son's hands. Nandi rises slowly. Ziomek does not let go of his hands, but steers him over to the spot where the alien is waiting. "Here you go," says the old man. "No, don't pretend. You may touch one another in my presence." Bormwéthu/énene trills in pleasure. Silver and dark enmesh, Nandi gaping at his father, bewildered. Ziomek takes a few tottering steps backward and observes them carefully. "Well," he says, "that fits, I guess. Now I am going upstairs and pack."

"Pack?" says Nandi.

"Pack. I am going with you."

"But you can't — I mean, the Commission —"

"Ha ha, old creature!" cries the alien. "You clever old creature, to learn all about us!" It bounds and picks the farmer up and trots around the room with him, crowing like a crow, clucking like a chicken, quacking like a duck, bleating like Particle Accelerator III, all to Nandi's outraged protests and a flood of laughter that gushes up in Ziomek like oil from a

drillhead (remember oil?). "You knew?" Ziomek gasps to his son-in-law. "You knew I wanted to go? But the Third Challenge — "

"Define 'son' without using 'father'!" shouts Bormwéthu/énene. "It is impossible! Son and father belong together! Yes this is true!"

"But the Commission," begins Nandi again, his voice very faint. "They'll never let Dad go. It would be wonderful, but — I'm sorry, Daddy, but you're too old and frail. You'd never pass the physical. And you don't have the science. And there's no money for it. And — " He stops and looks at the D'/fy, still holding Ziomek in its mighty arms. "Oh, shit."

"Did you not wonder at all why I wished to accompany you to this farm?" says the alien. "You think you study me, and get to know all about me. Well, two faces look at one another in the mirror, son of Ziomek. Your Commission will deny me nothing I require because your people wish our secrets. And as for this clever, *frail* creature — " it tosses the farmer up in the air and catches him effortlessly — "I, I, am Bringer of the Correct Equation!" च





PLUMAGE FROM PEGASUS

PAUL DI FILIPPO

In the Air

I DON'T GET into New York City that often these days. Consequently, I'm always overwhelmed during my visits not only by the vivid stimuli attendant on that unique urban milieu but also by the effort of maintaining a mental appointment book that includes as many visits to contacts in the publishing business — editors, agents and fellow writers — as can possibly be crammed into my unavoidably brief stay.

These distractions were my only excuse for telling the Port Authority trolling cab driver who picked me up my real line of work when he asked.

"Science fiction writer, huh?"

Contrary to expectations, the cabbie was not a foreign-born low-rung struggler but a young, white-goateed guy, some member of the Tamagotchi generation earning a few bucks between Phish concerts.

It was too late now to deny my foolish admission, so, bracing myself for the flood of snide derision that so often followed such a revelation, I replied, "Yes. Just had a new novel out last year." I didn't offer my byline or the title, hoping to avoid the obligatory, "I never heard of you or your book" response. But the cabbie's next words shocked me completely.

"Let me ask your expert opinion then. Don't you think the old-fashioned plot potential of an integral Dyson Sphere has been completely superseded by the pointillistic Dyson Cloud concept?"

I couldn't find my tongue for about thirty seconds. When I managed to reply, I stammered, "Wuh-well, not entirely. There's still a lot of mileage left in the older version that even Bob Shaw didn't extract."

"Who?"

"Bob Shaw? The British writer who died not long ago —"

"Never heard of him."

"But I assumed you were a fan...."

The driver took a hand off the wheel to make a dismissive gesture, and we nearly ran up the business end of a garbage truck bearing the colorful urban motto, "Open wide, West Virginia!"

"Nah! I can't remember the last time I read a book."

"Movies then?"

"Old media, dude."

"You surf the e-zines?"

"Not the fiction ones. I really like the WWF site though."

My face must have registered my utter confusion. "How did you get interested in the fictional use of Dyson Spheres, then?"

The insouciant driver shrugged, and we elegantly sideswiped a bike messenger. "I can't really say. It's just, like, something in the air, you know. People are always talking about some topic or other. I must have overheard a conversation and started wondering."

The rest of our intermittent dialogue was unmemorable, and by the time the cabbie deposited me outside my hotel, I had managed to put aside the conundrum. Having my first-offered credit card embarrassingly declined at the check-in desk helped concentrate my mind on the grim realities of maneuver-

ing through the unforgiving city in pursuit of my livelihood. So when the bellhop, tip in hand, hesitated on the threshold of my room, watching as I unpacked a stack of my latest paperback, and then asked me, "Sir, exactly how do you portray a working nanotechnology so as to avoid rendering it indistinguishable from magic?" I was completely flummoxed.

I focused on the bellhop for the first time and saw a wizened oldster, one of those New York working stiffs who seemed to have survived from a prehistoric era. I decided to adopt a friendly manner.

"Ah, my friend, you must be an old pulps fan! Do you know I've actually shaken Jack Williamson's hand?"

"Who?"

"Aren't you perhaps a member of First Fandom, conversant with science fiction from its earliest days?"

"That Buck Rogers stuff? Never touch it!"

"Why are you quizzing me about Clarke's Law, then?"

"I don't know what the hell you're talking about, mister! I ask you a simple question and you fancy it all up! Thanks for the one-dollar tip, big guy!"

With the noise of the slamming

door filling my ears, I sat on the bed and tried to make sense of what had just happened. Ten minutes later, acknowledging my utter failure to comprehend anything, I got up and had a shower. Then I went to my noontime appointment.

Gardner Dozois sat in his office at *Asimov's* with a strange expression on his normally jolly hirsute face. Gazing abstractedly out the window, he fondled an expensive-looking chrome gadget which I mistook at first for a *Star Wars* prop. I clapped the editor heartily on his shoulder and made what I thought was a decent joke.

"Shouldn't you leave those toys to Scott Edelman's *Sci-Fi Entertainment* magazine, Gardner? After all, you're running a *literary sf* magazine here!"

My editor swiveled around to regard me with utter solemnity. "This isn't a toy. It's a professional-grade chef's mandoline. It slices vegetables in a special way. Watch."

From a desk drawer he took a large Bermuda onion, which he proceeded to turn into a heap of redolent slivers while I watched in total astonishment.

"That — that's wonderful, Gardner. But I wanted to talk to you about my novella...."

From beneath the pile of trau-

matized onion shreds, Gardner withdrew a soggy manuscript. "Is this it? You'd better take it back. I haven't read it yet, and I doubt I ever will."

"But I submitted it six months ago! It can't be *that* bad!"

"It's not, it's not. But I'm out of this whole stale business now. I'm going to open a restaurant in Philadelphia. *Chez Dozois*."

"You're abandoning your whole career, a lifetime spent in the field? I can't believe what I'm hearing! Why not at least wait until retirement age? Why now?"

"I can't explain. It's just something in the air."

"I — I'd better leave now."

"One minute." The ex-editor reached into the drawer that had supplied the onion and took out a fluffy chef's toque. He donned it, smiled, and asked, "What do you think?"

"Beautiful. Now if I can have my story back, please —"

Storming out, I passed Stan Schmidt. The Burl-Ives-like editor of *Analog* was standing by the water cooler, strumming an acoustic guitar while the vivacious Sheila Williams sang a Peter, Paul and Mary song for an audience of co-workers.

Out on the sidewalk, the smell

of onions from my briefcase made me start to salivate, and I zeroed in on a souvlaki vendor, resigned to forgoing my editor-sponsored lunch (unless of course I was content to wait for the imminent opening of *Chez Dozois*). Assembling my sandwich, the vendor caught a glimpse of my Nebula nominee lapel pin.

"Maybe you can help settle an argument 'tween me and the wife, buddy. Do androids and other human simulacra question the epistemological basis of reality, or are they just displaced ethnic stereotypes?"

I dropped the sandwich and fled.

My next appointment wasn't until two. I killed time on a bench in Washington Square. During that interval, I overheard average children, teens, and adults discussing, among other topics, the practicality of governing interstellar empires, whether artificial intelligence would be achieved through top-down or bottom-up architecture, in what ways the term WATER MARGINS differed from BORDERLANDS, and whether the Wellsian dictum warning against "one oddness too many" in fantastic stories was still applicable in postmodern fabulations.

Dazed and bewildered, I staggered over to the Flatiron Building to meet with Gordon Van Gelder.

For one brief moment I could pretend that the strange mental virus "in the air" had failed to infect the youthful editor of *F&SF*, for he sat calmly, reading a magazine. But then I noticed that the stubble-checked boyish blue-penciller was examining not his usual copy of *Publishers Weekly*, but rather a glossy museum catalog. Spying me, he set the catalog aside and extended his hand.

"How are you doing?" Gordon graciously asked me.

"I've felt better. And you?"

"Just wonderful! I have a new job now. Director of the Curt Teich Postcard Archives out in Wauconda, Illinois. I curate my first show next month. You'll be getting an invitation, of course."

I edged carefully toward the exit. "And my column?"

"Oh, naturally you'll have to take that up with the new editor, whoever that might be. There's a wealth of applicants — folks you've never heard of have come out of the woodwork — but Ed's too busy earning his Florida real-estate broker's license to interview them yet. However, if you can write entertainingly about postcards —"

I knocked down a Chinese restaurant delivery-boy in my haste to clear Gordon's offices. Helping the

lad up, I was somehow not surprised to hear him exclaim, "TANSTAAFL!"

The downgoing elevator opened its doors to pick up passengers, and I was startled to spot Tom Doherty, Tor's own dapper publisher. Dressed as if he had stepped out of Tom Wolfe's sartorial dreams, the grinning Nebula Banquet sponsor wore a pair of binoculars around his neck.

"Can't talk now," Doherty blithely informed me. "I'm off to Saratoga for the opening day of Race Week. I've invested all of Tor's working capital in a stable of Kentucky thoroughbreds. Bye!"

In the Tor offices, pandemonium reined, as workers hurriedly cleaned their desks and conducted phone interviews with potential new employers. I stopped Patrick Nielsen Hayden and asked despondently if perhaps he planned on remaining behind to salvage this mess.

"*Moi? Au contraire.* Teresa and I have been tapped as hosts for a new network morning show. Regis and Kathie Lee, watch your ratings!"

My last hope was a certain silver-haired science-fictional patriarch. I stumbled into David Hartwell's office. He was busy on the phone, but waved me to a chair.

"What do you mean, they can't get the fabric to us? Damn it, we placed the order weeks ago! Well, hold their feet to the fire on it!"

He slammed the phone down and turned to me. "Sorry about that. But my new line of Hawaiian shirts is slated to debut in Milan next week, and I need to make sure we can fill all the anticipated orders. As soon as the buzz starts in *Women's Wear Daily*, I'm outta this sinking ship!"

Well, I beat Hartwell out the Tor offices by a week or so. But unlike him, I had no destination other than a dark bar. After six drinks — and a desultory discussion with the bartender about first-contact protocols — that was where the ghost found me.

He looked a lot like Heinlein and a little like Asimov, but there were elements of Frank Herbert in the beard, and a little Simak around the eyes.

The wavery ghost said, "Don't worry, son. It's just our field's version of the Negroponte Flip."

"The what?"

"Nicholas Negroponte, bigwig at MIT. He noticed that media that were once delivered by wire had gone wireless, and vice versa. He called it the Negroponte Flip."

"And you're claiming — ?"

"That all the common people, the mundanes — the mob who once knew nothing about science fiction — have become saturated with it, thanks to seventy years of exposure. Especially lately, with the new high profile of the field. The tropes are all in the air now. No one even has to read or watch the stuff anymore. It just drifts out of the noosphere straight into their heads."

"What about the professionals?"

"The high priests have burnt out. Their mental circuits are over-exposed. They're the only ones in

the world now who are immune to a sense of wonder."

"Well, at least we oldtimers will be famous and revered for our literary inventions."

"Not really. It's all too generic. Can you name the guy who invented the cinematic car chase?"

I pushed away woozily from the bar. "There's only one thing left for me to do, then."

The ghost looked nervous. "You can't kill yourself over this."

"Who's going to kill himself? There's a Starbucks franchise for sale back home that I've had my eye on for some time now!" ☞



Amy Casil's first professional sale was "Jonny Punkinhead" in our June 1996 issue. Since then, she has sold stories to Talebones, Zoetrope: All Story Extra, and several Writers of the Future anthologies and we'll be hearing more from her in the future (that's a promise). She lives in Southern California, where she has been working on several novels, teaching writing, conducting online workshops, and raising her daughter Meredith. Her new story takes us to the circus to look at some of the outcasts of that same society we first encountered in "Jonny Punkinhead."

Chromosome Circus

By Amy Sterling Casil

MACADAM'S CIRCUS HAD played out their week in Fontana, forty miles east of L.A., when Joshie the Clown found Little Bear. Joshie

was packing up the VR headsets in the Tokyo Tank trailer when he heard whimpering. He patrolled the rows of gummy plastic chairs until he found the source: a boy in a fuzzy blue sleepsuit, huddled in the next to the last seat in the back. The hood was pulled tight over the kid's head. He looked to be about four, and he stared up at Joshie with still brown eyes.

"Hey, don't be scared," Joshie said. He put on his best clown grin. The boy shrank away and tucked his chin into the suit.

Montego Bay, Macadam's hulking lead carny, came up at that moment. "Another lost kid," he said. "Better call the cops."

Joshie said, "I don't know, Monty. Look at his clothes."

The sleepsuit was smeared with yellow streaks of dried mustard. Joshie caught a whiff of sour child sweat as he loosened the knot at the boy's neck which held the hood tight. He pushed the soft fabric away from the boy's forehead to expose short, luxuriant golden fur.

"He's a freak," Montego said.

Amid the fur were two delicate pointed ears. The boy growled deep in his throat as Joshie touched the tip of his right ear.

"No point in calling the cops, is there?" Joshie put his arm around the boy and lifted him from the seat. The boy made little hooting noises as he nestled his head into Joshie's white and red striped ruff.

"Wonder if he can talk?" Montego stepped into the aisle. Montego was a normal, in the sense that his powerful chest and arms as thick as the average woman's waist were paid-for modifications, cosmetic only, as opposed to Joshie, who'd been born a clown, his nose ending in a tip the size and color of a ripe apricot. Joshie's most embarrassing disability was hidden beneath his red satin gloves: he had only three spatulate fingers and a thumb on each hand.

"Hootie-hoo! Hootie-hoo," said the boy.

"His parents must be real winners, dumping the kid here," Montego said.

Joshie shook his head. "Where else?"

Montego fingered his chin. "You got a point," he said. Then, his face darkened. "You're not thinking about keeping the kid?"

Joshie stroked the soft fur on the boy's head. The small legs tightened like a vice around his chest. "Maybe," he said. "You know what? I think he's a little bit like Gyla."

"Wrong color." Gyla was the silver wolf girl and her fur was all over her body. Montego crossed his arms and his bulging muscles tensed until it looked as though they'd leap from the skin. "Don't be stupid. Macadam will be royally pissed if you keep that kid."

The boy squirmed and Joshie got a whiff of the fur on his head. It was silky, but it smelled dark and oily, or maybe it was only the filthy smoke from the burning tires. "I know somebody who does child welfare in L.A. County. I'll call her when we get there."

Montego squinted at him. "Yeah? Well, maybe so. You'd better call her."

"Sure, Monty," Joshie said, grinning with his big red mouth. Montego cracked a smile and waved him off.

Joshie left the Tokyo Tank trailer and started across the lot, his big red shoes flapping and crunching in the pulverized blacktop. He started toward his own trailer, then paused a moment.

The boy said, "Hot! Hootie-hoo!"

"Yeah, I'll take you to see Gyla," Joshie told him. His heart skipped a beat at the thought of her, and he pushed the feeling away. Gyla could never, ever have any interest in Joshie other than friendship. He'd told himself that a million times. Gyla was beautiful, even though Gyla was, like Joshie and the kid and the majority of the people of Macadam's Circus, a freak. A virally produced genetic accident, sterile, a sport, a loser. The big man, Macadam, had scales. A fish man. Gyla had silver fur, a heart-shaped face and golden eyes.

Joshie crunched his way around the back of the trailers to Gyla's, which was pink, freshly painted, with a nice white awning over the door. The kid was getting heavy, and he was hooting loudly in Joshie's ear by the time Joshie knocked on the door.

Gyla wore only her bright blue g-string when she answered. Joshie tried to look at the pictures on her wall and not her breasts when he came inside.

"What's this?" she asked. She was buffing her silvery fur with a soft brush, the kind they made for horses. She looked curiously at the boy, who kept his face firmly pressed into Joshie's ruff.

"I found him in the last row in the Tokyo Tanks," Joshie said. "Look at his head."

Gyla smiled and petted the boy's head lightly. "Don't be afraid, little guy," she said. She gave Joshie one of her sharp, hundred-watt smiles and his cheeks flamed under his greasepaint. "Hey, you're just like me. Want to come to Auntie Gyla?" She held out her arms, and the boy hooted harder. Joshie grimaced because the kid was hooting right in his ear. His floppy cauliflower ears were more sensitive than average ears, and even though his rainbow wig gave some protection, it didn't make any difference when someone was making noises that loud, that close to his eardrum.

Then, the boy started to scramble against Joshie, his little feet digging like knives into Joshie's ribs. "Hey, easy," Joshie said, but the kid had already leapt away, into Gyla's arms. She grabbed him and stumbled.

"Gyla!" Joshie stepped forward, but she wasn't upset, she was laughing. She fell back on her blue velour couch with the boy, who was hooting fiercely and tugging at her silver fur wherever he could get a handful of it.

"Yeah, you are like me, little guy." She looked up at Joshie amid her wrestling with the child. "He's pretty dirty," she said. "Need to give him a bath."

Joshie nodded and sat on the edge of Gyla's dressing chair. "That's what I came for."

Gyla deftly began to unzip the boy's sleepsuit. "You'd better calm down now," she told him. "Auntie Gyla's going to get you cleaned up." The boy squirmed, joy obvious in every movement of his small, wriggling body, and tried to bury himself in Gyla's stomach.

"Help me out, Clown Boy," Gyla said. She was laughing.

Joshie got up, careful not to flap and break something with his big, ungainly feet, and held the boy around the waist as Gyla got him out of the suit. Save for his face, the child was covered completely in curly, golden fur.

"He looks like a teddy bear," Joshie said. Better than a clown, he thought. Even fish men like Macadam were better than clowns.

They got the boy into Gyla's clean, peach-colored bathroom and Joshie ran the water while Gyla poured pink bath crystals in the water. "See, it makes bubbles," she told the boy. He flapped his thin furry arms and gurgled.

Like a baby, Joshie thought. He wondered if the boy's parents had even tried to talk to him, or if they'd done as so many had done, treated the little freak kid like a pet. He seemed like an animal, but there was intelligence in his dark brown eyes. He splashed in the water, and giggled, just like a regular kid.

Gyla leaned over the tub and her perfect round furry breasts looked so lovely that Joshie forgot to breathe for a moment. The boy splashed, and where the water hit Gyla's fur, she was dark and oily-sleek. Joshie sat on the toilet seat and bit his lip.

"Scrub his back, will you?" she asked. Joshie's hand trembled and he grimaced as he took off his glove. He didn't want Gyla to see his ugly hand. He grabbed a soft brush with a wooden handle and worked suds into the boy's fur.

Then, the boy reached over and pulled the glove from Joshie's other hand. "Clown, clown," he said.

Gyla gasped. "Hey, he can talk!"

"I guess so," Joshie said. He tucked his hand in the pocket of his striped satin pants.

Gyla's delicate face grew serious. "You're going to call someone about him, aren't you?"

Joshie shrugged, then lathered the boy's head, careful to keep the soap out of his eyes.

"He is like a little teddy bear," Joshie said. He had a sudden reverie, picturing a little white house with a picket fence, a mailbox, a revolving sprinkler in the front yard, watering a perfectly trimmed green lawn. He, Joshie, sitting in a swing on the front porch, and Gyla next to him, in a blue-and-white checked housedress and a white apron. White slippers on her tiny, furry feet. They were swinging, and the boy was wearing checked bermuda shorts, running through the sprinkler, laughing.

"You'd better call someone about him, Joshie," Gyla said, a little more firmly this time.

"I know someone in L.A. who helps kids like this," Joshie said.

"Well, good," Gyla said. She got a star-shaped sponge wet and began to dab at the boy's face. "He's a nice kid, but how would you take care of him? You don't know anything about kids."

"Yeah," Joshie said.

"Even though you did come from a normal family and all," she said.

"It wasn't all that normal," Joshie said.

Gyla's eyes narrowed. She bared her teeth. "You don't know, Clown Boy. You don't know nothing about it, being in a home."

Gyla, like most of the freaks of Macadam's Circus, were jealous of Joshie, who had lived with his parents until he was eighteen, in Orange County. He'd gone to school with normals, he even had his high school diploma. It had been hell, he tried to tell them, hell until he went to Clown College and discovered that there were whole societies of people like him, some of them even worse off than he, though in his heart, there was nothing worse than being a clown. But most of the freaks had been in homes, dorms, going to school all together. Their hurts were different from his, and even with Gyla, trying to talk about being a living clown in the endless purgatory of a public high school was like trying to explain sand dunes to an Eskimo.

"Please," the boy said. Joshie and Gyla both leaned over the tub.

Gyla's ears pointed forward. "Please wanna stay," he said. "Like you." Then, he looked up into Gyla's face. "You pretty. Like you best."

"Aw, jeez," Gyla said. "Can you believe it?"

Joshie pictured the house again, then, as Gyla brushed against him and he felt her warm, damp fur against the back of his hand, he shuddered. He guessed he could find that social worker's number. She'd been a friend of his parents. His father, mother, it had been duty more than anything, keeping Joshie. The looks of disgust on his mother's face, when sometimes he came into a room and she hadn't been expecting him, or the beaten expression that his father had worn for years. A man who had wanted a son...who had instead gotten a clown. And the arguments. Late at night. Accusations. The virus came from sex, that was one thing everyone knew. Joshie's mother and father had invested a lifetime in accusing each other of being the one who'd picked it up, the one who'd contributed the tainted egg or sperm and made Joshie. He remembered one of his father's parting shots: "I'm just thankful you won't make another one like you, Josh. You won't be getting any girls pregnant." Joshie had thought for a long while his father had meant that Joshie was too ugly for anyone to make love with him, and the bitterness was almost palpable, but after a time he realized that his father had been talking about sterility. All freaks were sterile.

Maybe the white house with the picket fence (which was Joshie's house, until age five or so) was not such a good idea.

Gyla insisted on making a bed for the boy on her blue velvet couch. Joshie curled on the floor under a soft satin quilt that Gyla had sewn by hand. He listened to the boy's soft, contented breathing, and also to Gyla, who moved restlessly in her sleep, and who moaned, and with each moan, Joshie could not help thinking of going to her bed and forming his body around hers, then running his hands up and down her lean, furry flanks, stroking the soft, round breasts, but he willed this thought away by gazing at the boy's perfect, smooth little face, the way the fur curled away from his forehead in the moonlight and glinted off the tips of his small, pointed ears.

He did look like a teddy bear, Joshie thought, and at that moment, he decided to call him Little Bear. He told Gyla in the morning, and she agreed, while sipping coffee, that it was a fine name, very good, until they got to L.A. and Joshie called his friend from the child protection office.

The next day about four, they got to Long Beach, and everyone was grumbling because Macadam had picked a new spot for the circus, in the looming shadows of the huge waste conversion plant. It had been an oil refinery at one time, but as there was little oil left, it had been refitted for waste conversion. It was raining and the lights of the plant shone dimly through the fog. If Joshie squinted the right way, he could picture the high steel spires as the turrets of a castle.

"You're going to call?" Gyla had borrowed some clothes for Little Bear, who'd cooed and hooted as she'd dressed him. He was eating a corn dog in Gyla's trailer while Joshie stared out the plastic window at the waste plant.

"Yeah. Guess I'll use Macadam's phone."

"Good," Gyla said. "Why don't you go now? Before they come and get you to help set up. I've got to fix my costume. I'll watch him." She gestured at Little Bear, who grinned. His T-shirt was smeared with grease and fried batter crumbs. Mustard streaked the fur around his mouth.

Joshie found the social worker's number in the pocket of his green army jacket, the ugly one with sleeves long enough to cover his hands.

Probably the number wouldn't work. He considered returning to Gyla's trailer and telling her that he hadn't been able to reach the child welfare woman. No, he couldn't do that. He walked across the muddy yard to Macadam's.

Macadam was eating compressed soy pellets from a plastic container, pouring them directly into his mouth, then crunching them like peanuts.

"Hey, Joshie!" Macadam's head was slick and oval, hairless, greenish-white and delicately scaled. He had epicanthic folds around his eyes, and thin lips the color of spoiled knockwurst. Joshie had once watched Macadam lift the rear of a trailer out of the mud. That had been in Fresno. Macadam hadn't even gotten out of breath.

"I need to use the phone," Joshie said.

"Sure," Macadam said, his mouth full of pellets. "Heard about the kid."

Montego Bay had doubtless shared the story. Joshie now knew he had to make the call. The house with the white picket fence faded to a pinpoint, then blinked out. "Yeah, I know a lady who can take care of him."

"Should have called the cops back in Fontucky," Macadam said. Macadam had a derisive name for every town, and Fontucky was his for Fontana.

"Didn't want him to be taken to a home," Joshie said. He went to the phone and picked up a pencil, then began to punch the numbers.

"Where the hell do you think he'll end up? Little bastard's better off there anyway." Macadam wiped his lips.

Joshie didn't bother to remind Macadam that he'd grown up in a house, with parents.

Someone answered the number with "L.A. County Special Services."

Joshie asked for the woman who'd been his mother's friend, Claire Brigham.

"She's not with us any longer."

"I needed to talk to her. It's a special case," Joshie said, feeling nervous twinges in his stomach.

"She's retired. What was your name?"

"Josh Petersen. She was a friend of my mother."

"Mr. Petersen, anyone here can help you. Do you have a child for placement?"

"I, uh," Joshie paused. Macadam was leaning over, listening in. "I might know of someone, yes. Mrs. Brigham is still in the area?"

"Yes. Look, is this about her volunteer work?"

Joshie heard rustling papers. "Sure," he said.

The woman gave him Claire Brigham's number and he clicked off and punched the numbers as quickly as he could, struggling with the pencil in his clumsy fingers. He turned so Macadam couldn't see his face, and he heard the big fish man chuckling. Laughing at his hands.

The number rang a long time before someone picked up the phone, an older woman, laughing. "Look, if you're trying to get Pizza Pirates, I guarantee this isn't the right number."

"Mrs. Brigham? I don't want Pizza Pirates, I wanted you," Joshie said.

Macadam said, "Ha!" and began rattling the drawers of his desk.

"I'm sorry, I can't hear you," the woman said. Her voice was a mature woman's light tremolo.

"This is Josh Petersen. Maybe you remember my mother, Shirley?"

There was a pause on the other end of the line. "Yes, I do remember. You're the son, the one who..."

"I'm the clown," Joshie said.

"You got that right," Macadam interjected. Joshie's face grew fiery.

"Well, how may I help you, then? Is your mother in trouble? Has something happened?"

"No, nothing like that," Joshie said quickly. "It's just that, well, I'm with a circus now, a real circus. I'm a clown. And there's been something come up."

"I'm glad you found a place for yourself," Mrs. Brigham said. "Not many can say that."

Joshie turned to stare at Macadam, who was filing his nails to a point. He always kept them like that. Macadam had four long, slender fingers on each hand, but they were webbed. Maybe there were worse things than having only three big fat fingers.

"We found a boy abandoned yesterday, in Fontana. We're in Long Beach now. He's..."

"He's a changed child," Mrs. Brigham said.

Joshie had never heard that way of saying it before. He decided that he liked it. "He's got the virus, yes," he said.

"And you wanted to find a placement for him." Mrs. Brigham laughed, but not happily.

"Yes. We...I can't keep him."

"No," she said. "No, of course you can't. Well, you got me here at home, so you must have heard I'm no longer with the department."

"I did. I was calling because we don't want him to go to a home. I thought maybe there'd be somewhere else, something else."

"There are no families for children like this," she said.

"But maybe something better. Isn't there something that can be..."

Mrs. Brigham paused. "There is something, but it's only for the children with the greatest potential. I've been involved in a project for some time. It's called High Haven. In Lake Arrowhead. Maybe you've heard of it?"

Joshie hadn't. "High Haven?" It sounded wonderful.

"It's like a camp, only year-round. Run all by people who've been changed. Privately funded."

Joshie's heart leapt. Something like that for kids like Little Bear? "That's what I want," he said.

"It's not that simple. This boy has to have some support system outside of High Haven. People who care about him, and a place to go when he turns eighteen."

Joshie's mother had packed his things and put them in a large cardboard box on the front porch on his eighteenth birthday. "I see," he said.

"I'll have to come see the boy, meet with him," Mrs. Brigham said.

"We're in Long Beach," Joshie told her.

"Quite a drive. I'm not sure I can make it."

"I'll pay for an electric cab," Joshie said. He thought of his meager stash of money. Macadam fed them and housed them, but he paid wretchedly. Still, his money should cover it, providing Mrs. Brigham didn't live very far away. Her number had been from the San Fernando Valley.

"That's very nice of you," Mrs. Brigham said.

"We're here for a week. When can you make it?"

"Tomorrow afternoon, most likely." She asked for directions, and laughed when he told her they were in the shadow of the waste plant. Awful area, she'd said. Of course it was. Those were the only areas where Macadam's Circus went.

When Joshie got off the phone, his heart was light. He could hardly wait to tell Gyla about High Haven. Somehow they'd work something out, convince Mrs. Brigham that there was a, what had she called it? A support system for Little Bear. Gyla would help, he knew it.

Macadam had finished filing his nails and was rearranging his desk. "Heard you talking about High Haven," he said. "Let me tell you kid, it's a ripoff."

Joshie bit his lip. "What do you know about it?"

"It's all a scam, Clown Boy. Ain't nothing up there. Didn't I ever tell you how lucky you were to be working for me? At least I pay."

Joshie put on his gloves. "Yeah, you told me," he said.

"Look, maybe I should just call the cops. That kid's gotta be in a home."

"Don't do it," Joshie said. His heart was racing and he couldn't fathom the expression on Macadam's face. "Don't you do anything like that. I'm taking care of the problem."

Macadam leaned back in his chair. It squealed from his weight. "You know what? After you screw this up, you'll be back, Clown Boy. It's me who takes care of all of you here. Don't forget it."

Joshie didn't trust himself to say anything else, so he just shook his head and stumbled from the trailer. He'd only gone a few steps when Montego Bay came trotting up.

"Hey, I've been looking for you. We've got to get the Tanks set up, and the Abominable Snowman." It was drizzling rain and Montego's hair was slicked down over his forehead.

Joshie was still shaking from the run-in with Macadam. "I—I wanted to tell Gyla I've got something great set up for Little Bear. I mean, the kid."

"No time," Montego said, then he grinned. He didn't seem to notice that Joshie was breathing like a bellows. "That's good news about the kid. Calling him Little Bear, huh? If he was a little older, you might get him set up as a clown. Think of that, did ya?" Montego grabbed Joshie's arm and led him away.

Joshie had no choice. He slapped the seats up as quickly as he could, and checked the VR connections, which had always been his job. His fingers were clumsy, but his brain wasn't, and no one knew the system better than Joshie. Montego then had him brush down the animated Abominable Snowman, which required little coordination, and check the dry ice bays not once, but three times. One of them was stuffed with wads of blue and orange chewing gum and sticky used cotton candy cones. Grumbling, Joshie scooped out the mess. Then, finally, Montego released him with a sharp slap between his shoulder blades that took his breath away.

Joshie rushed to Gyla's trailer. It was already so late, nearly dusk. He bounded up the steps and tried the door. It was locked. Maybe she'd taken Little Bear to get something else to eat, or to meet some of the other performers.

"Hey, Gyla," he called. There was no answer. Joshie went to the window, where the lace curtains Gyla had sewn on a windy night on the road between Escondido and El Centro were drawn. The lace was filmy, transparent, and Joshie could see shadows within.

Gyla was inside, moaning, and a man was behind her, a large man with slender, webbed, long-fingered hands, stroking her breasts in slow, circular motions.

"You hairy little whore," Macadam said.

Joshie watched Macadam's big, sleek, scaly body through the lace as he did barbed things to Gyla, and he listened to her soft moans and Macadam's wet grunting. Then, Joshie turned from the window and with a sudden, sharp pain deep in his gut, he bent near the steps and vomited. Thunder crashed and it began to rain, and he headed for the clown tent. At least Little Bear had not been in the trailer. Little Bear had been somewhere else, and for this tiny thing, Joshie was very grateful.

Little Bear was in the clown tent, sitting on Hunny the Pig Girl's lap.

She turned her smiling pink face to Joshie and said, "Gyla asked me to watch him. He's a real sweetie, isn't he?"

Little Bear saw Joshie and went, "Hootie-hoo! Hootie-hoo!" Then, he flapped his arms like wings.

"Come on," Joshie said, and he grabbed Little Bear, roughly, under the arms, and began to carry him off.

"Hey, something wrong, Joshie?" Hunny the Pig Girl's face was full of concern. Her small eyes were as wide as they could get.

"Nothing," Joshie said. "Thanks a lot, Hunny." He retreated to his trailer, where he tried to interest Little Bear in some cheese doodles and a game of go-fish with a crumpled-deck of cards. Little Bear began to cry.

"Want my lady," he said.

"Aw, damn," Joshie said. Then, he remembered his balloons. He filled balloons and made animals for Little Bear, who cooed and hooted madly as he put a balloon hat on his head and pinched and squeezed the bright yellow rubber until it popped. When Little Bear tired of balloons, Joshie got out his makeup kit and made a sweet, smiling clown face on Little Bear, who sighed in wonder, then rubbed the red and the blue into the white greasepaint until his face turned into a pink and purple abstract work of art.

Joshie took Little Bear to get a bowl of soup and some crackers in the mess tent, then returned to the trailer. After Little Bear, who talked when he wanted to, begged and begged, Joshie allowed him to paint his face, or rather, smear greasepaint on with his soft little fingers.

"Like your nose," Little Bear said. "Funny."

"Yeah," Joshie said. "Real funny."

"Not sleep with lady tonight? My lady?"

"No, Little Bear," Joshie said. He turned away and Little Bear hooted softly. "Lady wants to be by herself."

Joshie tucked Little Bear into his own narrow bed and drew his rough green Army blanket around his neck. Little Bear complained about the scratchy wool so much that Joshie got out an old padded ski jacket and draped it over his small body. He took the blanket himself and sat in the folding chair by his card table, staring out the rain-streaked window.

Whenever Joshie closed his eyes, the image of Macadam bending over Gyla, kneading her soft, furred breasts, came to him like a cheap Polaroid snapshot. So, Joshie kept his eyes open and stared, a dry, empty feeling in his stomach. From time to time, he thought of what Macadam had called Gyla, and his stomach turned.

Joshie's only experiences with women had been of a business nature, quick, rough and dirty. And the women had never looked at his face, never. And he still recalled the chill shudders of some of them when he'd touched them with his ugly hands.

Gyla had seemed to enjoy Macadam's hands, with those awful pointed nails, the webbing between the long fingers. Still, maybe he'd threatened her. Macadam was like that. Several women had left the circus, suddenly, in the middle of the night. All Macadam's doing, Joshie knew. But Gyla had been moaning, soft and pliant. Willing.

No one had ever moaned that way with him. Joshie put his head in his hands and rested his elbows on the unsteady card table, and thought, bitterly, that maybe Gyla might like to be hurt. He looked at his stubby hands, and wondered if he could hurt with them.

The next day the circus was open. Joshie had three shows. He made Little Bear up like a tiny clown and instructed him to sit quietly in a slat-sided red wagon and smile at the people as they came by. Little Bear hooted and cooed at everyone.

"He's darling," a woman in a leather bodysuit said. "Look at that little teddy bear clown." Children pointed at Little Bear and Joshie and giggled.

After a while, the clowns were finished and the acrobats came out. Gyla rode a unicycle and danced with hoops to delicate piano music. A hush came over the crowd when she came out in her pink costume, a little risqué for the young ones, with her pink g-string and a couple of patches

over her breasts. But the circus got away with it because Gyla didn't expose smooth flesh, merely sleek, silver fur.

Joshie held Little Bear on his hip and worked quietly along the edges of the crowd, handing out neon plastic flowers to the kids. Joshie never talked to the crowd. He mimed everything.

"Look at that girl," a woman said softly. "She looks so strange."

"But she's beautiful," came a little girl's voice. "Her fur is so shiny and silvery. I wish I could dance like that."

"No, you don't," the woman said. "Don't say that, honey."

"Mama, she's pretty," the girl insisted.

Joshie stroked Little Bear behind his furry ears.

"We enjoy the circus, dear, but we don't want to be like them," the woman said.

Joshie could not bear to listen any longer, so he moved on. At last, the show was over. Macadam came out in his gleaming green suit, the bullet-headed fish man, and bade everyone a safe trip home after enjoying the sideshow.

Gyla caught up with Joshie and Little Bear on their way to the Clown tent.

"Hey! I missed you last night. Hunny told me you picked up Little Bear, and I waited for you all evening," Gyla said. Her tiara was crooked. Joshie reached over and straightened it.

"Sure," he said. "I bet you did." Couldn't she see him trembling?

Gyla stopped. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," Joshie said. "Let's get something to eat. Look, that woman I told you about is coming today. She might take Little Bear."

"Really?" Gyla grinned. She tried to link her arm with Joshie, but he pulled away. She caught his eye. "Joshie, what's the matter?"

"Nothing's the matter," he told her. She looked so beautiful, in her tiara and satin costume. Of course she wanted Macadam. He had the money, and he was powerful. Joshie didn't blame her, not at all. Probably it had been going on a long time. Macadam's hands had been familiar, knowing, as they ran along her slender body. "Let's get something to eat and we can talk about Little Bear."

"Sure," Gyla said, still uncertain. She walked silently with them into the tent.

Gyla fetched soup and crackers for her and Joshie, and another corn dog for Little Bear, along with plenty of mustard and napkins. She fussed with a napkin at Little Bear's neck while Joshie talked. It was better to talk about Little Bear. Better to talk about anything except Gyla.

The words rushed out. "Her name is Mrs. Brigham. She's coming this afternoon. She's older, didn't want to drive all the way out here. I told her I'd pay for her cab."

"That was sweet," Gyla said.

Joshie cleared his throat. "Look, she told me about a place called High Haven, up in the mountains. Little Bear could go there, if he's got... what did she call it? If he's got a support system."

"Oh," Gyla said. "I think I might have heard of it."

Joshie kept on talking. "We've got to convince her that Little Bear has some kind of home base here with us. Otherwise, I don't see as if he has much of a chance. After all, he doesn't talk very well. The noises, the crazy flapping. We know it's from how he was treated."

"Bad," Gyla said.

"Yeah," Joshie said. "Very bad. But I don't think Mrs. Brigham cares about that." Little Bear was gnawing on his corn dog and hooting happily. Joshie paused and wiped mustard from his chin.

"I have heard of this place," Gyla said. She crumbled a cracker into her soup. "It's run by people like us. All of them. Only...only they have educations. And money. And they care." Gyla stirred her soup.

"Where'd you hear about High Haven?"

"Somebody told me about it. Not in a nice way."

Joshie started to touch her delicate, furred hand, but he saw his big, ungainly red glove. Gyla liked sharp nails, webbed fingers. Not a baggy clown glove with only three fingers and a thumb.

"Seems to me that place takes money," Gyla said. "Donations and such. Maybe they'd be more likely to take Little Bear if we agreed to send money each month." Her head hung down now, and she was watching the crackers softening to white mush in the hot soup.

"Maybe," Joshie said. "I got the impression Mrs. Brigham meant that the kids needed to have a place to go after they turned eighteen and had to leave this High Haven. Like, a job and a home and such."

Gyla brightened. "I can ask Macadam. He likes the kid. He..."

"No!" Joshie shoved his soup away so hard that noodles and broth splattered over the table. "You damn well won't."

Gyla stared and started to say something, but Montego Bay interrupted.

"There's a woman here," he said. "Says she's here to see the kid."

Joshie leapt up and grabbed Little Bear. "Come on," he said. "There's a lady who wants to meet you. She's very nice, I promise."

Gyla followed, and Joshie didn't dare stop her. He couldn't chance upsetting Little Bear before Mrs. Brigham had a chance to talk to him.

Mrs. Brigham was outside the clown tent. She was a small, neat woman with a man's fishing hat pulled tight around her ears. The corners of her eyes crinkled.

"Josh Petersen? I didn't recognize you. You've grown up."

"They call me Joshie here. Joshie the Clown."

"Ah," Mrs. Brigham said. "This must be the boy."

"We're calling him Little Bear," Gyla said, stepping forward.

Mrs. Brigham smiled. "You're another friend, then?"

"I'm with Joshie," Gyla said. Joshie held Little Bear tighter, and Little Bear began to squirm and hoot.

Mrs. Brigham extended her hand. "I'm Mrs. Brigham. Do you know your name?"

"Little Bear," Little Bear said.

Mrs. Brigham tried again. "Yes, I've heard that, but do you have another name?"

Little Bear shook his head and said, "Hootie-hoo!" Then, he flapped his free arm, instead of taking her hand.

Mrs. Brigham looked questioningly at Joshie. "Has he done this as long as you've had him?"

Joshie paused, then decided there was no reason for lying. "Yes."

"It's called autism of change. We see it in many changed children, especially those who've been neglected."

"Autism?" Joshie remembered hearing that word, it was something like retardation, or craziness.

"No, not to worry. It's not like classic autism. It's responsive to treatment and training. In fact, most outgrow it."

"If they go to a place like High Haven," Gyla said. Joshie thought that she looked like she wanted to cry.

"Yes, if they go to a place like High Haven." Mrs. Bringham crossed her arms and studied Gyla. "You've heard of High Haven, then?"

Gyla nodded. "Listen, I want you to know that Joshie and I are committed to Little Bear's future."

Little Bear scrambled so hard against Joshie's side that Joshie had to put him down. Little Bear ran immediately to Gyla and buried his face in the fur of her stomach. Gyla stroked the back of his head and kept talking. "You take donations, don't you?"

"I'm not precisely associated with them," Mrs. Bringham said. "You'd have to speak to the staff. All High Haven staff are changed."

"I like that word," Gyla said. "Better than freak, or differently abled. What I wanted you to know is that I make good money here. Good enough, anyway. I can afford to send money each month for Little Bear, if that's what you want."

Mrs. Bringham shook her head. "Donations are welcome, but High Haven is more interested in the human side of things."

"But I'm not human," Gyla said.

Joshie stepped between them. "Please, just talk to him," he said. "Can you do some tests here? See if he's...how you said to me...if he's got potential?"

"I'll come back another day," Mrs. Bringham said. Little Bear let go of Gyla and ran to Mrs. Bringham and held her leg. She looked down and tentatively stroked his head. "That's all right, Little Bear. I'll come back with some friends and we'll play games, okay?"

Joshie didn't know whether to cry out in anguish or relief. "Can't you take him? Take him now."

Mrs. Bringham shook her head, slowly. "No, I'll have to get some help for this. He obviously doesn't talk much. We have different tests for that. I'm not qualified."

"I remember," Gyla said. "I've taken all the tests. Little Bear is smart. And he's young enough. If you take him to your High Haven, he's got a chance." Joshie saw now that Gyla was crying. "You can have as much money as I earn. I don't care, just so long as he has a chance." Then, Gyla looked up at Joshie, straight in his face, and opened her mouth as if she was about to say more, but instead, she turned on her heels, in her delicate white slippers, and ran away, toward her trailer.

Joshie stood silently a while, then collected Little Bear and pressed his face into his ruff. "I'm sorry," he said to Mrs. Brigham. "She was raised in a home. Most of them around here were. She's..."

"Bitter," Mrs. Brigham said. "I can understand that."

Joshie examined her broad, honest face. "Are you coming back?"

Mrs. Brigham looked at her shoes, which were practical brown brogans. "Yes. I'll call some friends. They'll come back with me. Give me a couple of days."

"All right," Joshie said, because it was all that he could say.

Then, Mrs. Brigham walked back across the damp, packed dirt lot to her waiting cab. She hadn't asked Joshie for any money. He called after her and asked about the money, but she waved him off.

"Go and talk to your girl," she called. "I'm thinking right now she needs a friend, Josh."

"She's not my girl," Joshie said.

"My lady," Little Bear said in Joshie's ear.

Joshie knocked on Gyla's door with his red-gloved clown hand. He and Little Bear waited a long time before she answered.

"She's not going to take him," Gyla said when she opened the door.

"Hey, don't say that," Joshie said. "She's coming back with some other people, in a couple of days."

"I've got some money," Gyla said. "I can get more."

Macadam's money. Joshie put Little Bear down on the blue velour couch, more roughly than he should have. Gyla had been crying, and her golden eyes were red. Joshie wanted to feel sorry for her, but instead, here she was talking about Macadam's dirty money.

Little Bear ran to Gyla's bathroom.

Gyla rubbed her eyes, and Joshie heard the water running. "He wants another bubble bath," she said.

"Mrs. Brigham doesn't care about money," Joshie said. "You heard her."

Gyla bent over and unhooked her bra. Joshie had to look away, and she walked around him and sat on the blue velvet couch and crossed her legs, then rubbed her eyes.

"Everybody cares about money," she said. She crossed her arms behind her head and thrust her chest out at him.

Joshie sat in her dressing chair and fiddled with her combs and brushes. "Everybody doesn't care about it," he said. "Or selling themselves."

She gasped, a little gasp, then her face hardened. "What are you talking about, Joshie?"

He slammed the big brush down on her dressing table, then picked up one of her blue fringed bras which she had flung aside. He held it up. "This? How about your good friend, Macadam."

"He's not my friend," Gyla said.

"Yeah?" Her silky round breasts jutted out at him.

"One of us is going to have to go in and check on the kid," she said.

"You do it," Joshie said.

"All right." She stood, then sauntered past him.

As she walked by, Joshie reached out, with his awful clown glove, and grabbed her waist.

She gave a little cry, then said, "Joshie, don't play me that way. I like you too much."

He pushed her from him. "You don't like me," he said.

She ran her hands over her hips, then turned toward the window.

"No," she said. "Maybe I don't. But I like your face."

Late afternoon light streamed in through the lace curtains and fell across her slender shoulders. She turned and straightened her g-string.

"Tell me that again," Joshie said. His voice sounded strange and rough.

She turned back and she was smiling. "I've always liked your face, Joshie."

He leaned forward and he touched her side, gently now, and stroked the soft fur.

"Hunny will watch Little Bear," she said. "I'm sure she will."

"That's not the right thing," Joshie said.

"Oh, yes it is," Gyla said. Then, she bent over and put her hand on Joshie's cheek and kissed him. Her fur smelled of sweet powder, like a baby. Her little tongue flicked in his mouth and Joshie felt the trailer spin around him.

Then, just as quickly as she'd kissed him, she pulled away and went to the bathroom. "Hurry up, Little Bear," he heard her say. "You're going

to visit with Hunny tonight." Then, Joshie heard Little Bear's squeal of delight.

After the arrangements were made and Little Bear was left safely with Hunny, who'd been thrilled at the honor of keeping him, Gyla came to Joshie. His fingers played over Gyla's soft fur.

Gyla caressed his face, lightly touching the tip of his nose, and he hated it at first and wanted to turn away, but she would not let him.

"You're so gentle," she said, over and over.

Joshie, his heart slamming in his chest, ran his fingers over her thighs, feeling as though he would cry each time she cried out. And she did not shudder at the touch of his hands, his clown hands.

"My beautiful girl," he told her. "Beautiful Gyla."

Late in the evening, as he lay beside her and cradled her in her soft, sweet-smelling bed, she began to talk.

"I can get a lot of money," she said, and he put his hand on her cheek to hush her, but she turned, and kept talking. "They all give me money. Lots of it. But I'd never take it from you, Joshie. I care about you."

Joshie remembered Macadam, bending over Gyla, handling her so roughly and coldly. It had enraged him, but now, he felt only sadness. If Gyla had been a normal girl, she never would have had to endure something like Macadam. Joshie couldn't think that Macadam was "someone."

"That place," Joshie said. "That High Haven. Maybe they wouldn't just take kids, Gyla. Maybe there'd be a place for us."

Gyla laughed. "No, I don't think so," she said.

"I meant it," Joshie said. "We can at least try."

"This place was freedom for me," Gyla said. "Can you understand that? To you, it's just a job."

What did she think he was? Where else would he earn a living, with his clown face and ugly hands and feet? Joshie ran his fingers along her flank and said, "I'm no different from you."

"Oh, yes you are, Joshie. You're a human being," she said.

"You're a human being, too," Joshie said. "Don't ever think you're not." Macadam's ugly words couldn't be how Gyla thought of herself. He stroked her back gently, until she fell asleep. Curled beside her, after a time, Joshie slept.

The next morning, he woke to the patter of rain on the roof of the trailer. Gyla was gone.

He dressed and ran out in search of Gyla and Little Bear. Macadam greeted him beside the Clown tent.

"You've got an appointment this morning," Macadam said.

"What? I'm looking for Gyla and Little Bear. The kid." Joshie rushed past him, fighting the desire to drive his fist into the big man's scaled gut.

"The boy is in my trailer. Lady says she has full payment for you and the boy to go to a place called High Haven." Macadam laughed. "I hear it's real nice up there."

Joshie stopped. "Where's Gyla?"

Macadam picked at one pointed nail. "She's taking a break."

Joshie rushed at him, his heart pounding. He grabbed Macadam's jacket. "Where is she?"

"She's fine, clown. Don't worry about her. Your ticket has been punched." Then, Macadam raised his arms and pushed Joshie away.

"You'd better not have hurt her," Joshie said.

Macadam shook his head. "I'd never hurt her. She's very special to me," he said. His eyes were hard and blind-looking, like a shark.

Joshie ran past him to the trailer. He would grab Little Bear, then find Gyla, and they'd all get out of the circus. That was the right thing, he realized. The little house with the white picket fence. Gyla in the swing beside him, and Little Bear playing on the lawn.

When Joshie reached Macadam's trailer, Mrs. Brigham was there with a tall, red-haired man and short, dumpy woman in a caftan. Little Bear was playing with a set of colored blocks behind Macadam's desk.

"You're a very fortunate man, Josh," Mrs. Brigham said. "Someone has endowed you and Little Bear."

Joshie looked between the man and the other woman, then at Little Bear. "I don't understand."

"You and Little Bear will both be going to High Haven. Little Bear will start preschool there and you are to be trained as a cook."

"Cook?"

"Yes, I'm afraid it's the only opening they have right now."

"What about Gyla?"

"She's staying," Macadam said as he stomped into the trailer and

pushed the blocks aside to sit at his desk. He smiled down at Little Bear with his sharklike smile.

"I won't leave without her," Joshie said.

"I'm afraid you have no choice," Mrs. Brigham said. She was still wearing the fisherman's hat. "The person who gave the endowment has stipulated that it's just you and Little Bear."

"Then just take the boy," Joshie said. "I'm not leaving without Gyla." He glared at Macadam, who merely smiled and toyed with the drawers of his desk. Macadam's nail file glittered on the desk. It had a sharp point, and Joshie was closer to it than Macadam. He could jump, grab it, hold it to Macadam's scaly fish throat.

Mrs. Brigham moved close and said very softly, so softly that Joshie might not have heard, had it not been for his over-large, sensitive ears, "Just come with us and it will be all right. Trust me."

Joshie nearly gasped, and he looked between her and the nail file. Macadam's neck...he was so close. Little Bear threw a block, and said, "Hot!"

Joshie decided he would have to trust Mrs. Brigham. "I'll be back for Gyla," he told Macadam. "You can count on that."

"Right," Macadam said, grinning. "You frighten me, Clown Boy."

"Let's go now, son," the red-haired man said. He leaned over and Little Bear scooted farther behind the desk.

"Come on, Little Bear," Joshie said. He squatted, and Little Bear looked up from the blocks, then reached for him. Joshie picked him up, feeling the familiar weight.

The woman in the caftan beamed. "You'll have a lovely time at High Haven," she said.

Macadam laughed as they left the trailer.

They walked toward the chain-link fence which surrounded the circus encampment. The waste conversion plant loomed overhead, spumes of white effluent smoking from its stacks. "Go ahead," Mrs. Brigham told Joshie. "Get in the van."

Joshie held Little Bear close. "You must think I'm crazy. I won't leave Gyla. Never."

"Just get in the van," Mrs. Brigham said.

The red-haired man stepped forward. "There's no cause for alarm," he said. The woman in the caftan patted his arm.

There was a driver in the van, and he opened the side for all of them. The others climbed in, and Joshie turned, looking back on the collection of circus tents and trailers. The sideshow lights flickered in the early morning light. The door to Macadam's trailer swung open, and he leapt down the steps.

"Please," Mrs. Bringham said.

The red-haired man pushed Joshie halfway into the van. "Didn't think he'd figure it out this quickly," he said.

Joshie looked around, confused, then the woman in the caftan and the red-haired man both forced him inside. Gasping, Joshie grabbed Little Bear as the red-haired man buckled them in their seat.

Mrs. Bringham slid to the front, then turned to the driver and said, "get going." Macadam was close enough that Joshie saw the gun in his hand.

"Let's hope he's a poor shot," the red-haired man said.

"Oh, he's a circus freak," the woman replied. "Not a professional."

Macadam crouched. Joshie bent over and tucked Little Bear's head into his chest. He heard popping noises, then dull whacks, and a few high, whining noises.

"He is a poor shot, isn't he?" the red-haired man said.

Joshie was completely huddled now, his breath coming in gasps. "You people are out of your minds," he said. The van jerked and threw Joshie against the door.

The red-haired man laughed. "You can sit up now. We're well out of range."

Joshie sat up and turned to see the circus lot fading in the distance. Little Bear curled against him, and he held him fast, then grabbed the red-haired man's shoulder. "Gyla's back there with Macadam. He'll kill her!" Joshie dug his fingers hard into the man's shoulder.

The red-haired man smiled. Joshie at first didn't understand when instead of replying, he reached with his free hand and tugged at the red hair. It peeled away to expose a perfectly smooth, white scalp. "I'm a clown too, friend," he said.

The woman in the caftan leaned across the seat. "And I'm porcine," she said, and she removed her face in one neat piece to show a round little pig snout and a pink rosebud mouth underneath it.

Little Bear said, "Hootie-hoo! hootie-hoo!" From the back of the van,

Joshie heard a tearing noise. He turned and saw the carpet covering, lifting up. Joshie fumbled with his seat restraint.

Then, Joshie saw a pair of pointed gray ears above a delicate, heart-shaped face.

Mrs. Brigham was trying to say something. "I didn't think Macadam would figure it out so quickly," she said. "I'm sorry, Josh."

Joshie barely heard her. "Gyla," he whispered. Little Bear struggled to escape the seatbelt. His feet dug into Joshie's thighs.

"I gave them money to pay Macadam," Gyla said. "It didn't work out just like I'd thought."

Little Bear said, "Hootie-hoo! Hootie-hoo!"

"It worked out fine," Mrs. Brigham said. "You have a good friend in that man Montego Bay."

"Money doesn't matter to us," the other clown said. "But it mattered to Macadam."

"Even with the money, Macadam still tried to keep her," Mrs. Brigham said.

The blood was rushing in Joshie's ears. The other clown, the pig woman, they were so confident. Powerful. Gyla leaned over the seat and took Little Bear. Then, she kissed Joshie on the cheek.

"I love your face, Joshie," Gyla said. "I love your hands."

"Hootie hoo!" Little Bear shoved his furry head hard between the seats. Just for this one moment, Joshie paid no attention, except to Gyla's velvet fur, even when the tears stung his eyes and ran along his big clown nose into the short, soft fur of her exquisite face.



David Langford has won a slew of Hugo Awards for his fan writing and for his fanzine Ansible (check it out at <http://www.dcs.gla.ac.uk/Ansible/>). His own short fiction has appeared in Interzone, SF Age, and a variety of other places...including most recently Nature. Of late his short fiction has been concerned largely with "information terrorism"; we're pleased to bring you a new story on the subject.

Different Kinds of Darkness

By David Langford

IT WAS ALWAYS DARK outside the windows. Parents and teachers sometimes said vaguely that this was all because of Deep

Green terrorists, but Jonathan thought there was more to the story. The other members of the Shudder Club agreed.

The dark beyond the window-glass at home, at school and on the school bus was the second kind of darkness. You could often see a little bit in the first kind, the ordinary kind, and of course you could slice through it with a torch. The second sort of darkness was utter black, and not even the brightest electric torch showed a visible beam or lit anything up. Whenever Jonathan watched his friends walk out through the school door ahead of him, it was as though they stepped into a solid black wall. But when he followed them and felt blindly along the handrail to where the homeward bus would be waiting, there was nothing around him but empty air. Black air.

Sometimes you found these super-dark places indoors. Right now Jonathan was edging his way down a black corridor, one of the school's

no-go areas. Officially he was supposed to be outside, mucking around for a break period in the high-walled playground where (oddly enough) it wasn't dark at all and you could see the sky overhead. Of course, outdoors was no place for the dread secret initiations of the Shudder Club.

Jonathan stepped out on the far side of the corridor's inky-dark section, and quietly opened the door of the little storeroom they'd found two terms ago. Inside, the air was warm, dusty and stale. A bare light-bulb hung from the ceiling. The others were already there, sitting on boxes of paper and stacks of battered textbooks.

"You're late," chorused Gary, Julie and Khalid. The new candidate Heather just pushed back long blonde hair and smiled, a slightly strained smile.

"Someone has to be last," said Jonathan. The words had become part of the ritual, like a secret password that proved that the last one to arrive wasn't an outsider or a spy. Of course they all knew each other, but imagine a spy who was a master of disguise....

Khalid solemnly held up an innocent-looking ring-binder. That was his privilege. The Club had been his idea, after he'd found the bogey picture that someone had left behind in the school photocopier. Maybe he'd read too many stories about ordeals and secret initiations. When you'd stumbled on such a splendid ordeal, you simply had to invent a secret society to use it.

"We are the Shudder Club," Khalid intoned. "We are the ones who can take it. Twenty seconds."

Jonathan's eyebrows went up. Twenty seconds was *serious*. Gary, the fat boy of the gang, just nodded and concentrated on his watch. Khalid opened the binder and stared at the thing inside. "One...two...three..."

He almost made it. It was past the seventeen-second mark when Khalid's hands started to twitch and shudder, and then his arms. He dropped the book, and Gary gave him a final count of eighteen. There was a pause while Khalid overcame the shakes and pulled himself together, and then they congratulated him on a new record.

Julie and Gary weren't feeling so ambitious, and opted for ten-second ordeals. They both got through, though by the count of ten she was terribly white in the face and he was sweating great drops. So Jonathan felt he had to say ten as well.

"You sure, Jon?" said Gary. "Last time you were on eight. No need to push it today."

Jonathan quoted the ritual words, "We are the ones who can take it," and took the ring-binder from Gary. "Ten."

In between times, you always forgot exactly what the bogey picture looked like. It always seemed new. It was an abstract black-and-white pattern, swirly and flickery like one of those old Op Art designs. The shape was almost pretty until the whole thing got into your head with a shock of connection like touching a high-voltage wire. It messed with your eyesight. It messed with your brain. Jonathan felt violent static behind his eyes...an electrical storm raging somewhere in there...instant fever singing through the blood...muscles locking and unlocking...and oh dear God had Gary only counted four?

He held on somehow, forcing himself to keep still when every part of him wanted to twitch in different directions. The dazzle of the bogey picture was fading behind a new kind of darkness, a shadow inside his eyes, and he knew with dreadful certainty that he was going to faint or be sick or both. He gave in and shut his eyes just as, unbelievably and after what had seemed like years, the count reached ten.

Jonathan felt too limp and drained to pay much attention as Heather came close — but not close enough — to the five seconds you needed to be a full member of the Club. She blotted her eyes with a violently trembling hand. She was sure she'd make it next time. And then Khalid closed the meeting with the quotation he'd found somewhere: "That which does not kill us, makes us stronger."

School was a place where mostly they taught you stuff that had nothing to do with the real world. Jonathan secretly reckoned that quadratic equations just didn't ever happen outside the classroom. So it came as a surprise to the Club when things started getting interesting in, of all places, a maths class.

Mr. Whitcutt was quite old, somewhere between grandfather and retirement age, and didn't mind straying away from the official maths course once in a while. You had to lure him with the right kind of question. Little Harry Steen — the chess and wargames fanatic of the class, and under consideration for the Club — scored a brilliant success by asking

about a news item he'd heard at home. It was something to do with "mathwar," and terrorists using things called blits.

"I actually knew Vernon Berryman slightly," said Mr. Whitcutt, which didn't seem at all promising. But it got better. "He's the B in blit, you know: B-L-I-T, the Berryman Logical Imaging Technique, as he called it. Very advanced mathematics. Over your heads, probably. Back in the first half of the twentieth century, two great mathematicians called Gödel and Turing proved theorems which...um. Well, one way of looking at it is that mathematics is booby-trapped. For any computer at all, there are certain problems that will crash it and stop it dead."

Half the class nodded knowingly. Their homemade computer programs so often did exactly that.

"Berryman was another brilliant man, and an incredible idiot. Right at the end of the twentieth century, he said to himself, 'What if there are problems that crash the human brain?' And he went out and found one, and came up with his wretched 'imaging technique' that makes it a problem you can't ignore. Just *looking* at a BLIT pattern, letting it in through your optic nerves, can stop your brain." A click of old, knotty fingers. "Like that."

Jonathan and the Club looked sidelong at each other. They knew something about staring at strange images. It was Harry, delighted to have stolen all this time from boring old trig., who stuck his hand up first. "Er, did this Berryman look at his own pattern, then?"

Mr. Whitcutt gave a gloomy nod. "The story is that he did. By accident, and it killed him stone dead. It's ironic. For centuries, people had been writing ghost stories about things so awful that just looking at them makes you die of fright. And then a mathematician, working in the purest and most abstract of all the sciences, goes and brings the stories to life...."

He grumbled on about BLIT terrorists like the Deep Greens, who didn't need guns and explosives — just a photocopier, or a stencil that let them spray deadly graffiti on walls. According to Whitcutt, TV broadcasts used to go out "live," not taped, until the notorious activist Tee Zero broke into a BBC studio and showed the cameras a BLIT known as the Parrot. Millions had died. It wasn't safe to look at anything these days.

Jonathan had to ask. "So the, um, the special kind of dark outdoors is to stop people seeing stuff like that?"

"Well...yes, in effect that's quite right." The old teacher rubbed his chin for a moment. "They brief you about all that when you're a little older. It's a bit of a complicated issue.... Ah, another question?"

It was Khalid who had his hand up. With an elaborate lack of interest that struck Jonathan as desperately unconvincing, he said, "Are all these BLIT things, er, really dangerous, or are there ones that just jolt you a bit?"

Mr. Whitcutt looked at him hard for very nearly the length of a beginner's ordeal. Then he turned to the whiteboard with its scrawled triangles. "Quite. As I was saying, the cosine of an angle is defined..."

THE FOUR MEMBERS of the inner circle had drifted casually together in their special corner of the outdoor play area, by the dirty climbing frame that no one ever used. "So we're terrorists," said Julie cheerfully. "We should give ourselves up to the police."

"No, our picture's different," Gary said. "It doesn't kill people, it..."

A chorus of four voices: "...makes us stronger."

Jonathan said, "What do Deep Greens terrorize about? I mean, what don't they like?"

"I think it's biochips," Khalid said uncertainly. "Tiny computers for building into people's heads. They say it's unnatural, or something. There was a bit about it in one of those old issues of *New Scientist* in the lab."

"Be good for exams," Jonathan suggested. "But you can't take calculators into the exam room. 'Everyone with a biochip, please leave your head at the door.'"

They all laughed, but Jonathan felt a tiny shiver of uncertainty, as though he'd stepped on a stair that wasn't there. "Biochip" sounded very like something he'd overheard in one of his parents' rare shouting matches. And he was pretty sure he'd heard "unnatural" too. *Please don't let Mum and Dad be tangled up with terrorists*, he thought suddenly. But it was too silly. They weren't like that....

"There was something about control systems too," said Khalid. "You wouldn't want to be controlled, now."

As usual, the chatter soon went off in a new direction, or rather an old one: the walls of type-two darkness that the school used to mark off-limits areas like the corridor leading to the old storeroom. The Club were curious

about how it worked, and had done some experiments. Some of the things they knew about the dark and had written down were:

Khalid's Visibility Theory, which had been proved by painful experiment. Dark zones were brilliant hiding places when it came to hiding from other kids, but teachers could spot you even through the blackness and tick you off something rotten for being where you shouldn't be. Probably they had some kind of special detector, but no one had ever seen one.

Jonathan's Bus Footnote to Khalid's discovery was simply that the driver of the school bus certainly *looked* as if he was seeing something through the black windscreen. Of course (this was Gary's idea) the bus might be computer-guided, with the steering wheel turning all by itself and the driver just pretending — but why should he bother?

Julie's Mirror was the weirdest thing of all. Even Julie hadn't believed it could work, but if you stood outside a type-two dark place and held a mirror just inside (so it looked as though your arm was cut off by the black wall), you could shine a torch at the place where you couldn't see the mirror, and the beam would come bouncing back out of the blackness to make a bright spot on your clothes or the wall. As Jonathan pointed out, this was how you could have bright patches of sunlight on the floor of a classroom whose windows all looked out into protecting darkness. It was a kind of dark that light could travel through but eyesight couldn't. None of the Optics textbooks said a word about it.

By now, Harry had had his Club invitation and was counting the minutes to his first meeting on Thursday, two days away. Perhaps he would have some ideas for new experiments when he'd passed his ordeal and joined the Club. Harry was extra good at maths and physics.

"Which makes it sort of interesting," Gary said. "If our picture works by maths like those BLIT things...will Harry be able to take it for longer because his brain's built that way? Or will it be harder because it's coming on his own wavelength? Sort of thing?"

The Shudder Club reckoned that, although of course you shouldn't do experiments on people, this was a neat idea that you could argue either side of. And they did.

Thursday came, and after an eternity of history and double physics there was a free period that you were supposed to spend reading or in

computer studies. Nobody knew it would be the Shudderers' last initiation, although Julie — who read heaps of fantasy novels — insisted later that she'd felt all doom-laden and could sense a powerful reek of wrongness. Julie tended to say things like that.

The session in the musty storeroom began pretty well, with Khalid reaching his twenty seconds at last, Jonathan sailing beyond the count of ten which only a few weeks ago had felt like an impossible Everest, and (to carefully muted clapping) Heather finally becoming a full member of the Club. Then the trouble began, as Harry the first-timer adjusted his little round glasses, set his shoulders, opened the tatty ritual ring-binder, and went rigid. Not twitchy or shuddery, but stiff. He made horrible grunts and pig-squeals, and fell sideways. Blood trickled from his mouth.

"He's bitten his tongue," said Heather. "Oh lord, what's first aid for biting your tongue?"

At this point the storeroom door opened and Mr. Whitcutt came in. He looked older and sadder. "I might have known it would be like this." Suddenly he turned his eyes sideways and shaded them with one hand, as though blinded by strong light. "Cover it up. Shut your eyes, Patel, don't look at it, and just cover that damned thing up."

Khalid did as he was told. They helped Harry to his feet: he kept saying "Sorry, sorry," in a thick voice, and dribbling like a vampire with awful table manners. The long march through the uncarpeted, echoey corridors to the school's little sickroom, and then onward to the Principal's office, seemed to go on for endless grim hours.

Ms. Fortmayne the Principal was an iron-gray woman who according to school rumors was kind to animals but could reduce any pupil to ashes with a few sharp sentences — a kind of human BLIT. She looked across her desk at the Shudder Club for one eternity of a moment, and said sharply: "Whose idea was it?"

Khalid slowly put up a brown hand, but no higher than his shoulder. Jonathan remembered the Three Musketeers motto, *One for all and all for one*, and said, "It was all of us really." So Julie added, "That's right."

"I really don't know," said the Principal, tapping the closed ring-binder that lay in front of her. "The single most insidious weapon on Earth — the information-war equivalent of a neutron bomb — and you were playing with it. I don't often say that words fail me...."

"Someone left it in the photocopier. Here. Downstairs," Khalid pointed out.

"Yes. Mistakes do happen." Her face softened a little. "And I'm getting carried away, because we do actually use that BLIT image as part of a little talk I have with older children when they're about to leave school. They're exposed to it for just two seconds, with proper medical supervision. Its nickname is the Trembler, and some countries use big posters of it for riot control — but not Britain or America, naturally. Of course you couldn't have known that Harry Steen is a borderline epileptic or that the Trembler would give him a fit...."

"I should have guessed sooner," said Mr. Whitcutt's voice from behind the Club. "Young Patel blew the gaff by asking what was either a very intelligent question or a very incriminating one. But I'm an old fool who never got used to the idea of a school being a terrorist target."

The Principal gave him a sharp look. Jonathan felt suddenly dizzy, with thoughts clicking through his head like one of those workings in algebra where everything goes just right and you can almost see the answer waiting in the white space at the bottom of the page. What don't Deep Green terrorists like? Why are we a target?

Control systems. You wouldn't want to be controlled.

He blurted: "Biochips. We've got biochip control systems in our heads. All us kids. They make the darkness somehow. The special dark where grown-ups can still see."

There was a moment's frozen silence.

"Go to the top of the class," murmured old Whitcutt.

The Principal sighed and seemed to sag in her chair a little. "There had to be a first time," she said quietly. "This is what my little lecture to school-leavers is all about. How you're specially privileged children, how you've been protected all your lives by biochips in your optic nerves that edit what you can see. So it always seems dark in the streets and outside the windows, wherever there might be a BLIT image waiting to kill you. But that kind of darkness isn't real — except to you. Remember, your parents had a choice, and they agreed to this protection."

Mine didn't both agree, thought Jonathan, remembering an overheard quarrel.

"It's not fair," said Gary uncertainly. "It's doing experiments on people."

Khalid said, "And it's not just protection. There are corridors here indoors that are blacked out, just to keep us out of places. To control us."

Ms. Fortmayne chose not to hear them. Maybe she had a biochip of her own that stopped rebellious remarks from getting through. "When you leave school you are given full control over your biochips. You can choose whether to take risks...once you're old enough."

Jonathan could almost bet that all five Club members were thinking the same thing: *What the hell, we took our risks with the Trembler and we got away with it.*

Apparently they had indeed got away with it, since when the Principal said "You can go now," she'd still mentioned nothing about punishment. As slowly as they dared, the Club headed back to the classroom. Whenever they passed side-turnings which were filled with solid darkness, Jonathan cringed to think that a chip behind his eyes was stealing the light and with different programming could make him blind to everything, everywhere.

THE SERIOUSLY NASTY thing happened at going-home time, when the caretaker unlocked the school's side door as usual while a crowd of pupils jostled behind him. Jonathan and the Club had pushed their way almost to the front of the mob. The heavy wooden door swung inward. As usual it opened on the second kind of darkness, but something bad from the dark came in with it, a large sheet of paper fixed with a drawing-pin to the door's outer surface and hanging slightly askew. The caretaker glanced at it, and toppled like a man struck by lightning.

Jonathan didn't stop to think. He shoved past some smaller kid and grabbed the paper, crumpling it up frantically. It was already too late. He'd seen the image there, completely unlike the Trembler yet very clearly from the same terrible family, a slanted dark shape like the profile of a perched bird, but with complications, twirly bits, patterns like fractals, and it hung there blazing in his mind's eye and wouldn't go away —

— something hard and horrible smashing like a runaway express into his brain —

— burning falling burning falling —

— BLIT.

After long and evil dreams of bird-shapes that stalked him in darkness, Jonathan found himself lying on a couch, no, a bed in the school sickroom. It was a surprise to be anywhere at all, after feeling his whole life crashing into that enormous full stop. He was still limp all over, too tired to do more than stare at the white ceiling.

Mr. Whitcutt's face came slowly into his field of vision. "Hello? Hello? Anyone in there?" He sounded worried.

"Yes...I'm fine," said Jonathan, not quite truthfully.

"Thank heaven for that. Nurse Baker was amazed you were alive. Alive and sane seemed like too much to hope for. Well, I'm here to warn you that you're a hero. Plucky Boy Saves Fellow Pupils. You'll be surprised how quickly you can get sick of being called plucky."

"What was it, on the door?"

"One of the very bad ones. Called the Parrot, for some reason. Poor old George the caretaker was dead before he hit the ground. The anti-terrorist squad that came to dispose of that BLIT paper couldn't believe you'd survived. Neither could I."

Jonathan smiled. "I've had practice."

"Yes. It didn't take *that* long to realize Lucy — that is, Ms. Fortmayne — failed to ask you young hooligans enough questions. So I had another word with your friend Khalid Patel. God in heaven, that boy can outstare the Trembler for twenty seconds! Adult crowds fall over in convulsions once they've properly, what d'you call it, registered the sight, let it lock in...."

"My record's ten and a half. Nearly eleven really."

The old man shook his head wonderingly. "I wish I could say I didn't believe you. They'll be re-assessing the whole biochip protection program. No one ever thought of training young, flexible minds to resist BLIT attack by a sort of vaccination process. If they'd thought of it, they still wouldn't have dared try it.... Anyway, Lucy and I had a talk, and we have a little present for you. They can reprogram those biochips by radio in no time at all, and so — "

He pointed. Jonathan made an effort and turned his head. Through the window, where he'd expected to see only artificial darkness, there was a complication of rosy light and glory that at first his eyes couldn't take in. A little at a time, assembling itself like some kind of healing opposite to those deadly patterns, the abstract brilliance of heaven became a town

roofscape glowing in a rose-red sunset. Even the chimney-pots and satellite dishes looked beautiful. He'd seen sunsets on video, of course, but it wasn't the same, it was the aching difference between live flame and an electric fire's dull glare: like so much of the adult world, the TV screen lied by what it didn't tell you.

"The other present is from your pals. They said they're sorry there wasn't time to get anything better."

It was a small, somewhat bent bar of chocolate (Gary always had a few tucked away), with a card written in Julie's careful left-sloping script and signed by all the Shudder Club. The inscription was, of course: *That which does not kill us, makes us stronger.* ‡

COMING ATTRACTIONS

NEXT MONTH'S LEAD STORY will introduce you to Glandar of Kreegenvale, a swordsman of great might whose stirring cry "Death to the unbeliever!" helps him retain his zest for battle. Actually, he's not a bad bloke once you get to know him...and know him you will, compliments of World Fantasy Award-winner Jeffrey Ford. Expect the unexpected in this one.

The February issue will also mark the return of Brian W. Aldiss after too long an absence. "Steppenpferd" takes us to the fringes of a far galaxy for a tale of faith and religion that strikes close to home.

We also plan to bring you new stories next month by Michael Shea and Dana Wilde, to name two. You want more? Well, the coming issues will have tales from newcomers like Rick Heller, Yoon Ha Lee, and Jennifer C. Vanderbes. We'll also have stories from veterans such as Albert Cowdrey, Ron Goulart, M. John Harrison, and Tanith Lee. We're hopeful you'll find lots of new favorite writers alongside those you already know and love.

The calendar page has turned, the Nineties are over...and yet the future still beckons from a distance. We'll continue to investigate.



A SCIENTIST'S NOTEBOOK

GREGORY BENFORD

WATCHING THE FUTURE ON TV

IN THIS last closing year of the millennium, we can enjoy the luxury of looking backward at the twentieth century (hereafter, the TwenCen), a time of great tumult and grand rhetoric. Though it may seem like a steady march of progress to some, I am struck by its sheer passion.

And I wonder if the future holds nearly that feeling of immersion. Will science and technology lead us to more involvement with our ever-grander world, or less?

This last century was severely divided: the first half a blood bath of two world wars, the second half a golden age. The clean dividing line was very science fictional: the "A-bomb," which made nation-state warfare impossible on the planetary scale.

The striking quality of that era

was how involved everyone was with the human prospect. "Atomic" — that is, nuclear — weapons, to paraphrase Dr. Johnson, focused the mind wonderfully. Warfare was deeply personal, for the barricades of convention erected at painful cost through centuries, barring attacks on civilians, had disintegrated. "Everybody is on the front line," as one commentator had it.

Further, the ideologies worked out over the course of the TwenCen, though inherited from the nineteenth century, demanded involvement: fascism, socialism, and communism were at best shouted conversations over what direction to take toward The Future. Like 'em or not, these ideas demanded participation. Idealists marched off to war in both the big conflicts, innumerable revolutions (nearly all failures), and in such sideshows as the Spanish Civil War as well.

As I write this, the NATO powers have just brought off the seemingly impossible in Kosovo — a zero-casualty war (on the NATO side, that is). Their bloodless victory came about largely through U.S. technology, pilots striking down from 15,000 feet and through robot (“cruise”) jet planes.

Here we see the seamless blend of politics and can-do engineering. Modern electorates don’t want to take casualties, even among armed forces who volunteered for the job. I grew up in a military family; my father fought in World War II and Korea, I spent six years living in occupied Japan and Germany, and was an officer in the reserves. How to convey how different the world seemed then?

The 1990s are as conceptually distant from the 1950s as can be imagined, even by a science-fictional mind. Most of us are no longer participants in history, but mere spectators.

In 1955 the Department of Defense (relabeled from the more truthful Department of War in the late 1940s) got 55% of the total federal budget; now it gets less than 20%. Yet we are far more secure. We have many more nuclear warheads in this world, but nobody goes sleepless over them.

One lesson I learned in infantry training was that units who get a reputation for not taking casualties well are not rewarded by the enemy. They then get targeted — precisely because they are easier to knock out of the conflict. That is why press officers were trained, fifty years ago, to avoid specifics on losses and how to “keep morale high” in the face of reverses. Because there would surely be some.

Yet we now see the advanced nations led by politicians afraid to sustain losses, out of fear not of foreign armies but of a domestic enemy — their political opponents, as revealed in the ever-present polls.

I think this is largely bad news, foretelling an era of dodgy international politics and terrorism-as-warfare. Note that in NATO’s loss-less war plenty of Serb civilians paid the ultimate price; that taboo remains thoroughly broken, and probably will be into the 21st Century. Paradoxically, the safest place to be was in the winning army and air force — not as a bystander. Even being a journalist was riskier.

We were all quite safe spectators, too — another new theme in advanced warfare. War correspondents (or “content providers” as some are called) brought us “footage” (actually, pixels) of anguish

and ruin, the best ones fought over by the big cable and network companies.

The science fiction of Jules Verne and his contemporaries a century ago foretold this last development, picturing foreign wars shown to horrified domestic audiences. Some of writers of that Wellsian era thought that witnessing the great tragedy of war would prevent it; instead, we have evolved an audience for price-free viewership. Nothing boosts ratings like gunfire.

Surely the story does not end here. A major unseen aspect of the TwenCen has been how passive the public has gotten. In our consumer culture we have the feeling not of making history, but of having it make us.

At this turn of yet another century driven by technology, what can we expect? Will passion return to civilization, or merely more distractions to amuse?

Robots and artificial intelligence generally form the conventional background logic of the future, and probably war will become ever more distant from the lives of ordinary people.

All chancy pursuits — policing, rescue — are already the stuff

of "real-TV," thanks to the video camera. Even our grand adventures will be so.

I have just finished a novel about the first crewed Mars expedition and how gritty and tough it will have to be, entitled *The Martian Race*. While researching it, poring through the designs of NASA and other planners, I realized that all of us will go along as well, riding with the manned rovers as they turn every fresh corner, puzzling over curious features — but at no risk to us, of course. Even the big time delay due to the finite speed of light, which will be half an hour or more for most of the expedition, will not blunt the feeling the explorers will have, of being the key-hole through which many billions of people peek at a whole new world.

When a climber on Everest knew he was dying in a snowstorm several years ago, he used his portable phone to call his wife in Australia and say farewell. This event calls up many conflicting emotions, ones we have never confronted before.

The best aspect of our intensely interactive future is that it knits humanity together. If tough issues come up on Mars, they will be endlessly debated Earthside. Few feats

of valor can ever again be carried out truly alone.

But that also means that even great events risk descending to the level of gossip. If the public is paying, it will be worse. I chose to portray a race to Mars for a prize of \$30 billion, because that frees the competition from the incessant over-the-shoulder anxiety that politicians live with every day. Who wants to explore Mars and find their every move second-guessed by couch potatoes — all watching the 21st Century on their 3D TVs in well-warmed, surround-sound cocoons a hundred million miles away?

Valor and heroes demand some distance. The future may not give that remove to them — to their loss, and to ours.

What of our own lives?

As population rises, and the advanced nations suffer more immigration, the future city will get more crowded, more prone to the vices of sprawl. But it will have subtle problems, for it shall be a living city — the Metropolis, eternally active in the computer sense. Smart chips will become so cheap that the capacity in your laptop will by 2030 reside in a single chip that can regulate your car, your clothing

or your home, with infinite gradations available, according to shifts in the weather.

By the year 2010, reasonably savvy computer chips will cost a penny apiece, meaning that anything could be made smart, able to interact with people dexterously. Sensing humidity and temperature, prescription bottles will constantly recalculate the expiration date for the medicine inside — and remind us with a beep when to take it. A chip in the packaged ham we bought on impulse will tell the refrigerator when it should be thrown out. Our homes will know which room we are in and tune them to us. Music, scent, art, air temperature and humidity, even the views out of flat-screen high-resolution windows — all will fit our preferences.

Commonplace machines will answer when spoken to, give assistance in their own operation (that is, answer dumb questions with unfailing courtesy). Deftly they'll program themselves to our repeated needs without being told. They will be true house servants because houses — indeed, all the Metropolis — will come to be servants. "Cocooning" will be ever easier.

We'll still venture out, though, if only for an ever-elusive variety, as chain stores proliferate and malls

guarantee safe sameness. At our favorite mall, a wall will hail us cheerfully by name as we approach, babbling in full-color big-screen enthusiasm about the bargains "just a few steps away!"

We may attempt to tell our wearable computer to disable all advertisements along our path, but somebody will find a way around that, too. Our self-software will be in a perpetual battle with an invasive world, much as telephone salesmen invaded our privacy in the TwenCen, and Internet sharks spammed us.

Our computer's biomed sensor will discreetly sniff the air and whisper in our ear implants if the salesclerk is still shedding cold viruses or if the subway car heading back home is a Petri dish of flu.

Even at home, we will get more advice than we may truly want.

Consumer Litigation News,
August 2026

**TENANT SUES APART-
MENT FOR INSULT**

"It Made Fun of My Weight,"

Complains Obese Resident

**Interactive Software Sug-
gested Health Club Member-
ship**

Such environments could yield a new style of human, bred into a comfy, caring culture. The city will seem not shadowy and sinister, a TwenCen film noir future cliché, but welcoming and responsive. In contrast, nature will seem dead or other-directed. Trees and animals will be noticeably oblivious, unconcerned with our well-being. Strollers in the park will feel uneasy leaving the manicured paths. Children on educational trips into the forest will crowd their tents together, seeking the reinforcement that they expect from their surroundings.

This new sort of human will have political impact, as well. Expect plenty more of good-for-you paternalism: strict rules favoring creature comforts and safety, much like today's no-smoking zones and tsk-tsk eyebrow raising at the very existence of steak restaurants.

As tiny risks get magnified by the ever-alarmist media, we shall see more bans on food ingredients like peanuts in airline food, a high protein wonder-plant of the last century to which a very few have allergies. Expect every marginal dislike to expand into a chance for treasured victim status.

This is already happening in the voluntary, closed communities

avored by the elderly. In California, several cities are wholly walled and gated. Rules set hours for mowing lawns and playing stereos, restrict types of pets and numbers of visitors. Beverly Hills has ordinances setting how many balls may be in play on a tennis court (to stop instructors from using the public courts) and the number of workmen who can park near a construction site.

All these rules have rationales, of course. Those who see the benign, friendly walls of the Metropolis as claustrophobic and subtly threatening will be considered cranks or subversives. Luddites, even.

Will this caring city shape a humanity missing vital, earthy virtues? The pervasive, softening imagery of this future humanity could be stifling.

TV/VR Guide Advertisement
Copy, October 29, 2037

DEATH VALLEY!

A hyper-reality voyage of horror and suspense. You never expected to spend the night in the Yosemite woods...or discover what lived there!

Tonight at 8. Only on the VentuR Network!

U.S. National Park Service
Quarterly, 2039, No. 2

28 PARK VISITOR CENTERS CLOSED

"Nobody Comes Any More," Ranger Laments

Every new technology can both open and close doors. The same development can encourage cocooning or claustrophobia or courage, depending on use. Sensors that read our facial expressions, sniff our breath and smell our skin for clues to our internal chemistries, can work wonders for some, who will be well served by extra artificial help.

The first arena to embrace new technologies is usually the market, where every edge is perceived to lead to profit.

Science, Vol. 379, March 24, 2023

WHO NEEDS ALL THAT CARRY-AROUND HARDWARE?

...few foresaw that these key advances in the physics and chemistry of carbon

nanotubes and related fullerene structures would lead in less than 18 months to practical carbon-based semiconductors — and then to an explosion of tissue-to-chip interface technology. Designers around the world are at work fashioning microprocessors, sensors, and other micro-devices into thin, flexible, highly biocompatible membrane computers that adhere to the body surface and integrate readily into the animal nervous system.

Eminently suited for human use, these “smart skins” will have myriad medical, technical, and consumer uses. Industry experts are also predicting a major shakeup for computer and communications-services markets, where conventional hand-held and wearable hardware has been a mainstay for decades...

Wall Street Journal, June 15, 2026

SKIN-VISION SHOWS PLAY WELL ON BLIND PATIENTS

“Images Not Just On Retinas Now” Say Mayo Doctors
Sight Substitute Could

Have Wide Commercial Applications

Bed-Bound Woman “Takes a Hike”

It may help to think not of a smooth future vista, following a steady trajectory upward, but of the odd turns such a future makes all too possible.

3-D Weekly — See What’s Coming at You! January 18, 2020

FASHION TIPS FOR THE HERE/NOW

...we clue you to the newest pleasing product — live toothpaste. This one is derived by the chem-wizards from yucky slime mold — but it’s ultra-hip. Just pop this little guy — it looks like a bit of strawberry jam — into your mouth, and you’re socially safe — forever! Spreads out around your gums, gobbling up food bits from that sushi or pizza you had an hour ago. And maybe it’ll even make your personal odor — your unspoken introduction — be, well, not so bad. It eats the germs that cause gum disease, too, but who cares about that if

you can't get a date anyway,
hey?

Greater USA Today,
October 8, 2032

Commentary

...as the House continues hotly to debate legislation to control the manufacture of pea-sized blobs of synthlife that live in the digestive tract and deliver daily doses of cocaine. Is this illicit production of a drug? It never appears outside the body and bloodstream. What about First Amendment rights?

Regardless of the regulations that emerge from Congress, it is clear that far more exotic methods of making designer drugs and eluding detection will be devised...

Los Angeles Times,
April 2, 2067, Classifieds

Designer animals to your taste. Like a green Siamese to match your furniture? A talking collie? What would you like it to say? Zap us at NewBreeds on the WorldWide Mesh. You imagine your fave animal — we deliver!

(Also: Pets reinvigorated
while you wait.)

Moreover, lest we imagine that such products will only be our pets:

WorldWide Mesh Popup Ad,
June-July 2072

Want to work beneath the sea? Or experience space up close and personal? We can let you breathe under water or in a vacuum.

Always tired? Convert sunlight into quick energy with our custom photosynthetic epidermis! **THINK GREEN — BE GREEN!**

We design for the truly unusual customer.

**NEW HUMANS ASSOCIATES,
CLAVIUS BASE, LUNA
LIVE LIKE THE LUNATICS!**

All these are mere glimpses of what could await us in the next hundred years. A century is an enormous span, stretching our foresight to the full. H. G. Wells's great visionary novels appeared only a century ago, yet many of their imaginings have come true. Some never will — particularly two of the most lasting: Martian

invaders and time travelers.

The point of specific visions is not their accuracy, but their implications. Ray Bradbury often remarks that his goal is not to predict the future but to prevent it. Quite right — some visions we may not favor, but should study — and here sf comes into its own.

Iowa City Ledger,
December 28, 2060

OUTRAGED SPOUSE DESTROYS SEXBOT WITH SHOVEL

Third Case in Johnson
County this Month
Injunctions Sought
Against "Irresponsible" Dallas
Manufacturer

Social reaction will ultimately spell the fate of many innovations, perhaps more than in the high-flying TwenCen.

New York Times,
June 11, 2063, Op-Ed Section

...so again we see cleverness collaborating with chaos. Defenders like EroCorp's CEO Terry Dixon continue to point out that drug- or VR-enhanced

robotic sex is better than having to deal with "quirky, moody humans." Sexbots are always available, consenting, infinitely programmable, non-judgmental, and disease-free. As a welcome benefit, he points out, abortions, teen pregnancy, prostitution, and sexual diseases have plunged dramatically in the past three years.

Arguments about the immanent extinction of the species, as we all presumably become sexbot connoisseurs and fail to reproduce, have been summarily dismissed by demographic and population-control experts worldwide. In any case, the World Health Organization is committed to having the first twelve artificial-womb banks up and running by the end of the decade. We don't bother to realign any longer, and the government will pay the cost.

At last, society appears to have found the true roots of the problem of sexuality — human beings....

Atlanta Journal-Constitution,
February 22, 2095

**DOZENS RIOT AT NEW
PURITAN RALLIES**
3 Hospitalized as "Newpys,"
"Oilcans" Tussle

Angry New Puritan activists fought off attacks from robotic-sex extremists at three street-corner sites in downtown Atlanta today. The militant "Newpys" marched and distributed applications to passersby for the low-cost breakthrough procedure known as limbic reconfiguration, or LR, which erases the sex drive.

Interviewed earlier today on *Good Mornin', AmeriCan*, a Newpy leader referring to himself only as Ultimata praised LR as a "God-sent corrective therapy" that is "bringing us to our rational, anti-animal senses for the first time in human history." When asked to comment on the findings in clinical trials that children who had been given the therapy at birth later found their parents' "obsession" repulsive, Ultimata said that he "could only applaud their per-

ceptiveness. These kids are way out ahead in the moral march."

Though robots will alter much about our laboring life, the greatest promise lies in integrating them with biotechnology. This could usher in as profound a revolution as industrialization did in the early 19th century. It will parallel and interact with other vast themes — the expansion of artificial intelligence, the opening of the inner solar system to economic use, and more.

The true issue for thinking people is how this immense menu of possibilities plays out, not considered each in isolation, but all together at once. The conceptual goulash promised us by even such fairly linear projections as I have given here is both tasty and daunting.

This means it is properly the stuff of both science and science fiction.

Whatever surprises lie in store, thinking broadly and variously will be a better preparation — and more fun — than all the earnest, linear projections the futurists can make.



The prolific Mr. Bailey continues to send us stories from his Tennessee home at a good clip. This latest one (his fifteenth story for us in seven years) is a dark, lush tale that turns Kentucky into something creepy, fabulous, and new. Enjoy.

The Anencephalic Fields

By Dale Bailey

DADDY LEFT WITH A BIG-CITY dollymop when I wasn't but six years old, and Mama got a job tending the corpse gardens outside of Scary, Kentucky. By the time I was twelve, a tow-headed not-quite boy in his daddy's hand-me-down jeans, I remembered the dollymop better than I did the man himself. She was a loud, brash redhead with tits like jugs and a mouth like a wound, but Daddy had faded to a dull blur of memory. I couldn't for the life of me remember how he looked and Mama said the resemblance was minimal; but I could remember how it felt when he touched me, and if I tried I could still smell his jackleg whiskey and the black-market smoke that always hung about him. Mostly, though, I could recollect his hands. I used to lie awake nights, fingering over that memory in my mind, like a miser with a bag full of gold — the memory of those big, callused hands against my face and the sound of his voice when he said, "You're the man of the house now, Kemp. You've got to take care of your mama." That was just before he left — I remember the dollymop waiting in her car, while Mama cussed them both in the background — and I hadn't seen either one of them since.

Mama claimed this particular memory was a lie, but when it came to Daddy, Mama had her own issues, and I'd learned not to press her on them. I took what I had — the dollymop and her tits, Daddy and his hands — and let Mama do her own grieving.

Meanwhile we moved to Scary, Kentucky.

The good folks of Scary didn't cotton to outsiders, so Mama and I were pretty much alone out there with six acres of the not-quite dead. Rust-dimpled NO TRESPASSING signs hung on the razor-wire fence surrounding the compound.

DANGER!

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AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY
BEWARE ATTACK DOGS

they read, but I never knew of any dogs. Not that it much mattered. Mostly this all happened during the crash and people had more important things on their minds, like food. Our land was too hardscrabble to make it worth stealing, and nobody wanted to eat what we were raising anyway. The rumors were enough to keep anyone else away. When I was little, I always expected to look out the front windows one night and see a line of torches winding out of the surrounding hills, like the villagers in a flat-screen Frankenstein, but the worst trouble we ever had was townies throwing rocks at the signs on Halloween — and even that came to an end when Mama accidentally left a gate open and a couple of the kids got a glimpse into one of the growing sheds.

Me, I've never been superstitious, so the meat didn't bother me one way or the other. That was the word I used around the house, meat, mainly to bug Mama, who mostly used another term. I used to see it in the reports she sent to BioGene every month or two: anencephalic. Mama had an education — a lot of education — and I suppose that was one of the things I held against her. Mama never let me join up at the school in Scary; she said she wasn't paying her hard-earned dollar to see some second-rate hillbilly corrupt her son with nonsense. I didn't see how she reckoned her dollar hard-earned; she never did anything but tend the meat and zombie down the cyber-highways as far as I could see. But the long and short of it

was that I was pretty much stuck out there in the corpse gardens with six acres of meat and one ball-busting bitch who didn't have a use for any man, much less one that sprang from the loins of her dear departed.

The way I figured it, Daddy had a lot to answer for.

THE MAN NAMED SMEE came to our little corner of paradise in my twelfth summer. I watched the dust trail draw near from a ridge not far outside the fence-line. Most of the vehicles that came that way — and there weren't many in those days — took the branch that leads by an old logging road south to Beauty. But this one came straight on, and by the time I glimpsed the humvee itself, a dull metal flash motoring along through the trees below, I had worked out exactly what that meant.

Once upon a time Mama and I had entertained our fair share of visitors. There had been her friends from the college where she used to teach for one, and a worse bunch of cackling hens I never hope to see, but that pretty much came to an end during the crash, when it wasn't a good idea for a woman to travel alone. BioGene reps had stopped in three or four times a year as well, high profile corporate drones most of them, with faces impervious as glass and their big-city dollymops along for a squeeze. But that petered out during the crash, too. Mama said that BioGene had shifted into bio-warfare research big time by then, and we figured they'd forgotten all about their little experiment — though I suppose someone must have remembered because corporate continued to download Mama's check regular as clockwork.

Mama thought we were safer in Scary than we might be in lots of other places, so we stayed put and tended the meat because that's what we'd always done — or at least since Daddy had left, which was as close to always as I could figure when I was twelve years old. But BioGene hadn't sent one of their drones around for over four years at this point, so when I saw the humvee rumbling through the trees below I figured the stranger to be a bandit, and I lit out for home.

Mama was a bitch all right, but I'd long since decided that if anyone was going to kill her, it was going to be me.

I nearly got myself killed instead. Mama stood on the front porch with

Daddy's old Mossberg in her arms and as I cornered the last of the growing sheds, she spun like a high-strung cat and leveled the shotgun right at me. Maybe I didn't really sense her finger tightening about the trigger, but I sure thought I did, and for a single frozen heartbeat I couldn't see a thing but the enormous barrel of that shotgun, hateful and deadly as a borehole to hell.

Then she kind of nodded. "Kemp," she said, and all the air went out of me in a woosh.

"What's going on?" I said. "Who's — "

Already she'd swung the shotgun away from me. "Shut up, Kemp," she said, and someone else added, conversationally,

"Yes, lad, do shut the hell up, would you?"

I glanced into the yard and that's when I got my first look at Shamus Smee. He looked like nothing more than a drowned sewer rat, thin faced and delicate boned, with a three-day beard running to gray, and furtive eyes the color of lead. He wore combat boots and a sweat-stained camo jumper, and his corded hands hung at his thighs, flexing with nervous tension. He projected a sense of contained energy, like a coiled steel spring, and when he spoke again, his clipped northern accent sounded wheedling and hostile:

"Now then, you were saying — "

"I was explaining to you and your slut how you had taken a wrong turn in Scary," Mama said. "Less you have i.d."

Said slut — a waif-like twenty-something with a close-cropped head of dirty blonde and a torso-hugging mood shirt — gasped. "Shamus — " she began, the T-shirt flaring an angry red, but Smee interrupted.

"Shut up, Lush. True is true. Back to the car with you."

"Shamus — "

"Back to the car with you, I said!" He turned on her and something electric passed between them. I could feel it, sizzling in the August heat.

The blonde edged toward the humvee, parked carelessly fifteen meters from the house. Its doors stood open, internal alarms bleating like a sickly cow. Smee stood his ground.

"As I was telling you," Smee said, "BioGene has — "

"Nobody informed me that you were coming."

"I have come to relieve you. And frankly, I couldn't give two shits whether you were informed."

Mama didn't answer. She just set her mouth in a grim line and started down the steps, gesturing with the shotgun. Smee backed away, lifting his hands, palms outspread before him.

Then all hell broke loose. The blonde darted toward the humvee, her shirt flickering with anxiety, and Mama swung the Mossberg around. The shotgun jerked, spitting fire, and thunder smashed the air into millions of glittering shards. Shot kicked up dust at the blonde's heels as Smee surged toward Mama, his corded hands outstretched. Mama stepped up to meet him, reversing the shotgun like a club. And even as I realized that they'd forgotten all about me — all of them, Mama, Smee, even Smee's slinky blonde dollymop — I was moving. Not toward Smee, but toward the blonde and the humvee and whatever it was that she might have hidden inside it.

She had the head start, I had speed. I got there maybe a split second behind her, but even as she lifted the pistol from between the seats, I hurled myself through the driver's side door and grabbed for the barrel. In the enclosed space, the detonation was deafening. The barrel bulged and heat passed through my clenched fist. The bullet banged off the armored ceiling, ricocheting through the interior of the humvee like a speed-crazed bee. For a single instant, the blonde and I stared dumbfounded at one another, the pistol caught between us. Everything seemed grotesquely heightened, super real. I could feel sweat tickling between my shoulder blades, I could see the wild pulse at her temple. Mostly though, I could smell her perfume, so sweet it made my mouth water, like nothing in my life up to then.

Yanking the gun away from her, I jammed the barrel into her face and backed her out of the humvee, scrambling across the seats to follow her through the passenger-side door. My heart was racing, my breath ragged. I could hardly keep the gun steady on her.

"Don't," she whispered, and her shirt went gray with fear. She caught her lower lip beneath her teeth and her eyes widened in their orbits, but I didn't trust myself to speak. I backed away a step, angling my body so that I could see the entire yard. Smee was climbing to his feet before Mama, cradling his jaw in one hand. Mama pumped a fresh shell into the empty

chamber and leveled the shotgun at Shamus Smee with a pleasant smile. "Now, then," she said, "I think you were fixing to show me some i.d."



AT NIGHT I walked the rows.

During the day, the corpse gardens had nothing to offer me, just endless aisles of pale emerald bodies erupting from soil-sunk pods, slick and stinking with insecticides from the overhead sprinklers. The growing sheds themselves were long narrow buildings like covered bridges, banged together from corrugated tin with Plexiglas skylights open to the Kentucky sun. Within, the bodies grew in rows, the soft inhaling, exhaling, farting, moist life of them obscured by the clatter of machinery — air conditioners and wheezers, pumps and fans. But in the night...in the night, you could *hear* them — the not-quite-dead, anencephalic, brain-deprived vegetable (Oh, how rich a term!) corpse meat to which my mother had devoted her life —

You could hear them breathing.

Maybe that's how it started — just a small boy, nine, ten years old, fleeing the Kentucky farmhouse where his father did not live and where his mother bent her every waking hour to the six acres of meat beyond the peeling clapboard walls. I used to move through the moon-splashed rows, gazing down at them, their breasts heaving with the half-lives Mama had thrust upon them. Just listening, comforted somehow by the steady sigh of respiration, the slow reflexive shiftings of their mindless slumber.

Transplants.

That had been Mama's original plan, all those years ago when she had gotten the first BioGene grant — before the corpse gardens themselves took root, before the disorders and the crash that followed. Before Daddy abandoned her to feast on the juicy sweetmeats of his downtown whore. But no one had ever come to harvest the organs, and now, with the world winding down around us — Mama's metaphor, not mine — maybe no one ever would.

In the meantime, I found another use for them.

And so we come to a part of my tale I don't much like to think on. But I was twelve years old — think of it, twelve! — and my dreams burned like fever with half-imagined images of Daddy's dollymop, and the pleasures

such a woman might confer upon me. Oh yes, I took solace among the dead.

I found her in the spring of that year, in the strange half-light of a cloud-gauzed moon that hid the color of her flesh. I must have walked past her a thousand times without paying her any attention, but that night the play of light and shadow across her body drew me to her. I stood there looking down at her, heavy breasted with dark-rouged nipples, and farther below, beyond a sweet smooth curve of belly where no umbilical knot winked its solitary eye, the honey patch that hid her sex. Like Daddy's jug-meloned grope, I remember thinking, and what I did next I did without a moment's conscious thought. Bursting with the kind of groaning lust only a twelve-year-old can know, I shucked my clothes and stood engorged in the moon-washed silence. I felt as if I had stepped over the edge of an enormous precipice. Like I was falling.

On my knees, between her falling thighs, I drove myself to the hot, wet core of her. Her ripe vegetable scent enveloped me — the moist verdure of rich soil and green things growing and sweat — and her body moved beneath me reflexively. When I brushed away the tangle of leaves that lay across her face, I saw her vacant eyes snap open to stare into the still Kentucky night, and in the same moment I felt something give way inside me. I closed my eyes as I came, and when I opened them again, the world had changed forever.

After that I tried to stay away from there, but I could not. The growing sheds and their promise of sweet, slick sin drew me back; it left me gasping, that sin, my fingers tangled in the leaf-grown tubers which bore the meat life. But it left me full. And that moonlit August night when Shamus Smee arrived in Scary, Kentucky, I found myself drawn to my accustomed place, to the corpse that so reminded me of the brassy tart who had lured my Daddy into another life.

And, oh, my friends, it was sweet. It was velvet and roses, it was wine and song, and when I threw my head back and dug my fingers into the black, black loam to either side of her heaving breasts, caught in that moment of equipoise when the floodgates tremble within you — in that moment, it was sweeter still. Then the floodgates burst. I cried aloud as the shudders tore through me and I emptied myself within her. Then I opened my eyes, and that was when I saw him, silhouetted against the

moonlight, watching from the open door of the growing shed, his corded hands dangling beside him:

Smee. Shamus Smee.

"Smoke, boy?" said Shamus Smee.

He spun a home-rolled bone across his knuckles like a trick wizard and magicked it into nothing before my eyes; it reappeared between his grizzled lips, conjured from the very air. He dug out a lighter, and the tent — their tent, I'd watched them set it up a hundred meters from the house in the heat of the summer afternoon — filled with the heady tang of black-market smoke.

Shamus Smee exhaled a blistering cloud of gray, sipped bourbon from the neck of the bottle, and smiled gingerly. The smile was knowing and ironic, a smile of shared secrets, a smile between men. It reminded me of our encounter in the growing shed, his figure limned against the moonlit night.

"My name's not boy."

"Isn't that cute, Lush? His name's not boy. Pray tell, what could his name be?"

"What's your name, kid?" said Lush, recumbent on a mattress of home-blown air, not looking at me, not looking at anything as far as I could see.

But I was looking.

I studied the lines of her body under her clothes. All sinew and bone, Lush was, with her helmet of bleached blonde hair and her tits mere bumps under the frayed green fabric of her T-shirt. The shirt said, *Ask me, I might*.

"Kemp," I said, and I said it to her, but she only yawned.

Smee leaned toward me in his canvas chair. When I glanced at him, I could see the purple shadow Mama's Mossberg had left across his stubbled jaw. "Well, if it's not smoke," he said, "and it's not booze, then whatever have you come for, *Kemp?*" He drew the last word into a mocking parody.

I did not — I could not — speak.

"What do you want, lad? You want to ask me something, is that it? You want to talk?"

"Sure."

Smee uttered an ugly little laugh, like stones trickling into a dry well. "To talk, Lush, you hear that?"

"Mmmm," said Lush.

And Smee said, "So talk."

He rubbed his bruised jaw with one hand. His hands were big and callused and didn't go with the rest of him, like he'd been sewn together from leftover parts and someone had tried to make do.

"Nothing to say? Then let me ask you this: how do you like it here in hillbilly heaven?"

"I'm not a hillbilly. Mama —"

"I know about your mother. Your mother was a big-league brain once upon a time. And I know where you came from and I know why. And I know your father left you and I know you're here alone. And I know we've got a stalemate. Your mother has the guns, but Shamus Smee has all the time in the world. You hear that, Kemp Chamberlain? All the time in the world. And I'm. Not. Going. Anywhere."

He winked at me and lifted the bottle. I watched his hands, those big hands, and smelled the smell of him — the stink of whiskey and smoke — and I tasted something ashen and hateful in my mouth.

"She won't back down. Not unless the company tells her to, and maybe not then."

"The company sent me. I am their trusted emissary."

Lush snorted and turned her back to us.

"Alas," said Smee, "Lush has grown cynical in the ways of corporate America. Forgive her. My purpose here is not the point. The point is this: do you like Scary, Kemp?"

I hesitated. "All right, I guess."

"Not much company is there? A young man like yourself, I think he might get lonely." He gazed at me through a cloud of malodorous smoke, his eyes like flat and knowing stones. "Do you get lonely, Kemp?"

"Some —" I cleared my throat. "Sometimes."

"The world has changed since your mother brought you here, you know. Chaos, but for a resourceful young man chaos presents opportunities. And you have proven that you're resourceful. Lush can testify to that. You ever think about the world out there, Kemp?"

"Sometimes," I said, and even as the word slipped away, I wanted to

draw it back. I wanted to tell Shamus Smee the truth — that I was burning inside, that I was burning with a hunger for the great wide world beyond Mama and her precious dead, beyond the growing sheds and the meat that could not contain forever the cravings that consumed me. But I didn't say another word.

Smee stubbed out his smoke and conjured up another. I watched his knowing fingers roll it and place it in his mouth unlit. "I thought so."

"What kind of opportunities?"

He leaned forward, so close that his whiskey stench of breath washed over me, and when he spoke again, his voice fairly pulsed with intensity. "I can make it real for you, boy. No more play acting, no more pretend. I can make it real," he said. He said, "Think about it," and then he leaned back, lifted his lighter, and ignited the home-rolled butt. He puffed at it for a moment, and then he extended it toward me between two blunt nicotine-yellowed fingers. "It's the real thing, lad," he said, and almost against my will I reached out and plucked it from him. I took it and wedged it between lips that had gone so dry they felt like they would crack, and I inhaled it like a drowning man. And, oh, the taste was sweet.

"Now run along," he said. "I have things to do."

But I stood outside the tent and watched their shadows on the taut canvas — watched Lush pout and stare, and Smee smoke another cigarette before he rose to extinguish the lights, one by one, until only a single lamp burned within, like a beacon shining out at me from another world. Afterward, I watched their shadows tangle, Smee wiry and small with those big hands grasping, and Lush jerky with a kind of joyless haste, grinding her boyish hips atop their mattress of home-blown air. Toward the end she cried out, a muffled lament of grief and despair, somehow lonely, a cry a woodland creature might have uttered. But Smee didn't say a word. Me? I stood there watching long after the tent had gone dark. And when I turned away I spat into the grass. There was a foul taste in my mouth. I had smoked Shamus Smee's black-market bone until it burned to a cindered roach between my fingers.

Mama had waited up. She sat in the black living room, smoking a denatured cigarette and gazing out the back window at the score or so of growing sheds, the rolling acres of the not-quite dead.

"Where have you been, Kemp?" she asked.

I stood by the stairwell and said nothing, my heart all tangled in the stink of Smee's black-market smoke — in the burnt-wood fragrance of jackleg whiskey, the memory of corded hands.

She said, "You think I don't know what you do nights?"

I flushed. "But I — "

She waved her hand as if to swat away a fly.

"You've been out there with Smee, have you? Listening to his lies."

"Are they?"

"Lies?" She shrugged. "I'm checking into that." She turned to look at me, the cigarette flaring, so that her face seemed to grow and shift and retreat into the gloom. "What's he want, did he say?"

I shrugged. "Said he wasn't leaving."

"Didn't think he would."

"I told him you wouldn't back down unless the company told you. Maybe not then."

"What did he offer you, Kemp?"

And now I thought of her again, my pale green dollymop, my mindless, brain-stripped grope writhing underneath me, impaled on the shank of need. *I can make it real*, he'd said, and what had that meant? What could I ever say to Mama, how could I explain? He offered me the world, I could say, he offered me the whole wide world — and, oh, I long for it. But all I said was nothing.

"Well," Mama said lightly. "Something, I'm sure."

I turned and started up the stairs, but halfway to the top I turned around. "You ever want to get away? You ever want to see the world?"

"I've seen it, Kemp. It's overrated."

"That's not what Daddy thought," I told her, and then I started up again. When I reached the landing, I heard her speak again, hardly more than a whisper, but in the silence whispers carried. I thought there might be tears in her voice, but I didn't think I was supposed to hear them. And besides, I didn't care.

"Why do you hate me, Kemp?" she said.

But I could think of no reply.

...

Dreams fractured my sleep: nightmarish flights through endless dark, here and there punctuated by glimpses of eerily distorted faces, somehow more terrifying still — Mama, her lips set against some fate I could not yet perceive; narrow-faced Lush, her blue eyes hooded with mysterious intent; and the dead, acre after acre of the silent and accusing dead. And then, in one of those bizarre transformations that come to us in dreams, I found myself in the growing shed, found myself staring down at my Daddy's red-headed squeeze, found myself kneeling between her parted thighs. My friends, I threw back my head and cried out loud for the joy of it, for the sweet, slick rapture of her body under mine. And only at the end did I see what was happening to her face: it was changing, melting somehow, transforming itself into the rat-faced visage of Shamus Smee —

— *I can make it real for you* —

— as I spurted in her depths. Horrified, I scuttled away. The body — Smee and not Smee, my Daddy's jug-meloned dollymop and the verdant corpse into whom I emptied all my dreams — capered and howled, hurling itself against the medusa coils of foliage that bound it to the earth. I screamed and tried to wake, but there was no waking, only flight. Then not even flight, only an abrupt arresting surface against my back, unyielding as a stone.

All the world suspended in a single breath, I turned and gazed at the thing that had obstructed me: the scuffed combat boots and the sweat-stained camo jumper, the big and callused hands. They reached out to gentle me, those hands, and it was like a lock had opened in my heart. A rush of feeling overwhelmed me as I looked into his face. It was a face I had never once been able to recall, a face I had never even seen in dreams.

It was my Daddy's face.

And then I woke. I lay there in the tangled sheets for the longest time, but no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't bring that face into my mind again. Nothing at all remained. Only the silent bedroom, the vacant mirror of my memory, the stain of hot Kentucky sun against my sleep-stunned eyes.

I found the house brain armed, the house itself locked down, with Mama hunkered at her board. A single glance at her sight-glazed orbs and I knew that she'd gone zombie, searching out the cyber-highways for

answers to whatever questions haunted her. I breakfasted on a day-old crust of bread and let myself out, re-arming the house behind me. Smee's tent was empty, but out by the fence-line I saw Lush, clad in bone-colored rags and a T-shirt that flashed her vital signs in neon random. She stood with her back to me and her fingers laced in the links, gazing off through the woods at the road that wound south to Scary.

She glanced up when I stopped beside her. "Where's the dogs?"

"Never was any. It's just a sign."

"Too bad," she said. "I like dogs."

She ambled along the fence-line, glancing off into the woods now and then. Heat shimmered over the ridges, and the whole world looked wilted. I gazed with numb fascination at a single bead of sweat glistening at Lush's temple. *Lush*, I said to myself, and the name conjured up images of steaming jungle, of fevered efflorescence. I said it again, "*Lush*," rolling the single syllable off my tongue, recollecting the way her eyes had widened when I pointed the gun at her, the scent of her perfume. Only this time I must have said it just above my breath, for she glanced over at me, lifting her eyebrows, and said, "How's your hand?"

"My hand?"

She aimed her finger at me and dropped her thumb like the hammer of a gun. "Bang," she said, and I thought of the pistol's breathtaking concussion, the barrel bulging in my clenched fist as it spat the bullet into the humvee. "Well?"

"Oh, it's fine." I hesitated. "I wouldn't have shot you, you know."

"I would have shot you."

"You *tried* to shoot me."

"Well, what'd you want me to do? Shamus was pissed, you know, said if I wasn't such a lousy shot — " She shrugged.

"Where is he?"

"Out and about." She gestured vaguely at a cluster of growing sheds. "You know, he's more interested in all those bodies than in you and your mom. Or even me." She laughed, and added wryly, "He wants to give me to you. Thinks it'll bring you around."

"Do what?"

"Give me to you." She thrust her index finger into the hollow cylinder of her left fist.

I could feel the heat behind my face.

"Jesus," she said. "I didn't mean to embarrass you." She began to grind her hips suggestively, and I turned on her, thrusting her away. She stumbled, and laughed aloud, her eyes aglitter with meanness.

"It's not like that — "

"Then what's it like? You think they enjoy it, kid? You think they're having big screaming orgasms? Well, I got news for you, they're just glorified fuck dolls."

"Yeah, and what are you?"

She didn't answer for a moment, and then she laughed again, a strange bitter little laugh. "Maybe you're right."

She turned her back and stalked away along the fence-line. She hadn't gone far before she began to pick up speed, and finally she ran blindly, her coltish limbs falling into an aimless awkward gait, like she didn't know whether she was running away from something or into the arms of something else, some mysterious fate she could not even imagine yet, let alone see.

The thing was, I *knew* how she felt. I'd felt that way about a thousand times myself, thinking about Mama and Daddy and the dairy-rich whore he'd followed over the far horizon, like a dog with a hard-on for a bitch in heat. See, I too had walked that fence, and this is what I learned: no matter how hard you run, you always end up in the same place you started. And so I thought of Lush, Lush and her stupid T-shirts and the way her eyes had widened when I leveled the pistol at her, Lush and the faint aroma of her perfume and the first word she had ever said to me —

— *Don't* —

— and somehow I was running too.

"Wait!" I cried, but she did not wait, and my breath was coming hard when I saw her stumble at the crest of a knoll and tumble down the other side. She was still lying there, half laughing but mostly crying, when I arrived, sweaty and out of breath. I stood over her, watching her heartwave race across her T-shirt in a jagged line.

I wanted to apologize, but I couldn't begin to guess how, so I settled for not saying anything at all. I only stood there, staring down at her and her idiot T-shirt, her pulse rate blinking like a moronic beacon over the bump of her left breast.

"Well?" she said.

"Do you like him?"

"You really don't get it, do you? It's not about liking him or disliking him, it's about survival: long as he gets his dick wet, that's how long he takes care of me. That's the way the world goes round."

"Why don't you leave?"

"Where am I gonna go? Not all of us can live behind fences, Kemp. Who's gonna take care of me? You?"

"I might."

We were silent then. Lush sat up, her head hanging, her arms draped over her knees, her breath coming in shallow gasps. After a while, she glanced up at me from beneath her cap of dirty blonde hair. "You're sweet," she said. "Maybe I won't shoot you after all."

"Your mother let you out today?" said Shamus Smee.

"She going to stop me?"

He measured me with one eye, squinting away smoke from his black-market bone. "I think she might at that, lad."

He pinched out the smoke, tucking the butt into his pocket before he turned back to his work. What that work was I couldn't say, but his hands charmed me, so dexterous and quick. He brushed a flickering red jewel on the belly of a spidery-looking thing made of wire and chrome; its claws flexed, extruding filaments of shining silver. When he let it go, it scuttled off beneath the foliage, through the rows of meat.

Smee grunted thoughtfully, tapped at his wafer board for a moment, then fished another spiderclaw from a cardboard box. The growing shed seemed alien and strange, aswim in the emerald light of a failing sun, ripe with the stinks of fertilizer and sweat and greenhouse foliage healthy to the edge of rot. I could hear the faraway chuff of the wheezers and Smee's pensive grunts whenever one of the spiderclaws stole humming into the rows. If I listened close, I could hear something else, too — the inspiration and expiration, the respiration of the slumbering dead. Like music, a siren song or symphony borne from a distant shore.

Said Smee, "So you've spoken to Lush, have you?"

"That's right."

"You like her?"

"Why? You planning to give her to me?"

"Does the idea offend you?" Smee asked.

He'd been hunkered over a supine spiderclaw, studying it through a jeweler's loupe and using a tiny screwdriver to tinker with its guts. Now he flipped closed the little metal breastplate and lifted the loupe with its elastic band onto his forehead. "Well?"

But I had to think about his question. The fact was I *did* want Lush — the taste and scent and look of her, not the secondhand allure of her perfume or the dime-shop charm of the T-shirts she affected, but the spare, sinewy reality I sensed beneath the T-shirts, under the perfume, on the far side of her skin itself. Lush. *Herself*. But I had a notion that Smee couldn't give me that, and probably hadn't any right to try — that maybe only Lush could, and only if she were willing.

"It doesn't seem right."

"Right?" Smee threw his head back and laughed. "I couldn't care less about that, my friend. The point is, I *can*. I *can* give her to you."

He stood and nudged the squirming spiderclaw onto its feet with the toe of his boot. The thing scurried away into the failing light.

"Under certain terms," Smee said. "You'll enjoy Lush," he added. "And I won't mind, there's a thousand like her."

"Terms?"

"Terms. Guns, for one. I want the guns. And you'll have to disarm the fucking house, won't you?"

"What about Mama?"

"What about her?"

"You'll hurt her."

"Would you mind so much, Kemp?"

"Maybe," I said. I said, "Maybe not." And after a moment, I added: "She might hurt you instead."

Smee laughed out loud. "Me? Hurt me? I don't think so, boy. Your mother's weak. She has no taste for cruelty. So I'll do as I please."

"And what's that? What is it that you've come for?"

"Ah," Smee said, "that's the question isn't it?" And now he stopped before me, the jeweler's loupe cocked atop his forehead like a third eye, his breath a reek of nicotine and whiskey. Tiny blisters of sweat clung to the gray stubble of his beard, and his teeth were mossy and crooked in his rat-

like face. His eyes shone in their intensity, and when he reached out to lay a hand against my cheek, his touch was gentle. His touch was a caress. "We're two of a kind, we are, my friend," he whispered. "You want it to be real, and I — I've come to make it so."

He laughed again and turned away from me, hunkered over his wafer board, his thick fingers flying across the keys. And what I felt was rage — at Shamus Smee and at my mama, too, at my long-gone daddy and the smiling slut with her mouth like a wound and the gatefold tits who had stolen him away from me. At all of them, all of the adults and the complex world they had made for me to understand. "Mama beat you once," I said. "She could beat you again."

"Not again," said Shamus Smee, and he punched a final key with one blunt finger.

Behind me, in the gloom of the growing shed, a rustle erupted among the rows of slumbering dead. My heart banged against the cage of my chest as I spun to face it, my mind abruptly flooded with the backwash from my dream — my pale green dollymop arisen from the dead. And friends, it was true, true —

I saw her heave herself up, saw her shrug away the life-bearing tubers that entangled her, smelled the ripe complaint of bruised foliage as she came toward me through the rows — erect, alive, *real*, my half-dead squeeze with her tits like jugs, my grope, my fuck doll, my goddess. Mine. Just as Smee had said. I stood there, rooted to the ground as surely as if I had grown there, companion to the numberless dead. Fear gripped my throat and heart, but I did not, I could not flee.

And then she took me in her arms and pressed her lips to mine. I could feel the swollen tips of her breasts through the thin fabric of my shirt, could smell her cloying green fragrance. I could even taste her, like raw spinach and spit and a faraway hint of fecund earth. My cock throbbed inside my Daddy's cast-off jeans. A stricken rat clawed in my constricted throat. Fear and desire, that's all it came to, wound like snakes about the caduceus of my spine.

I thought of Lush, fraught and hurting Lush —

— *you think they like it, kid?* —

— chasing herself around the compound's fence only to arrive back where she started, but then my half-dead dollymop pressed her groin

against me, and friends, I could not say her no. I thrust my tongue deeper into her mouth, lifted my arms to embrace her, ran my fingers over the knobby, root-woven terrain of her sap-slick back. At last I pressed my hand to her neck to draw her face still closer to my own, and that's when I felt it: the spiderclaw, pulsing with internal heat, its attenuated strands of silver plunged into the warm flesh that encased her spinal cord —

Smee laughed and from the corner of my eye, I saw his fingers dance across the wafer board.

Abruptly, my dollymop slumped against me, dead weight, her tongue an extruded chunk of flesh, slack between my lips. I screamed and stumbled back as she slid to the floor in a boneless heap, and knowledge pealed inside my brain like a bell:

Dead, dead, dead. Just so much meat.

"Sometimes," said Shamus Smee, "cruelty is necessary."

I FOUND MAMA in her study, a dark shape against the surrounding darkness, staring silently at her board. For a moment I thought she hadn't returned, that she was still out there somewhere, another lost soul roaming the cyber-byways. Then she moved, the slightest adjustment of her head and shoulders, but enough to show me that she was here after all, at home in her body. Awake. Crying. I don't know how I knew that, but I didn't doubt it for a moment: it was after midnight, and Mama was sitting in her study, weeping. The simple fact of it touched something in me that I had locked away six long ages past, when we first came to Scary, Kentucky. In all those years I'd never seen Mama cry; now I had seen it twice in as many days, and just that suddenly the whole cloth of my life had started to unravel. I could hardly imagine a change more disturbing — not if the sun had failed to rise that morning, not if all the stars had fallen from the midnight sky.

What would I do if I didn't have Mama to hate?

But there it was, and maybe Mama sensed it, too, for when she spoke I heard a certain stillness in her voice, a gentleness I had not known before.

"So you've been out there again, have you?"

"Yes."

"All day?"

"Most of it."

"And what do you think of him, Kemp, our friend Shamus Smee?"

Once upon a time, I'd have replied with sarcasm if I bothered to answer her at all, but that strangely gentle tone gave me pause. After a moment, I said, "He scares me, Mama."

"Me, too," she said. She said, "And yet you're drawn to him, aren't you?"

I said nothing.

"What does he want, Kemp?"

"I don't know."

Mama laughed. "You're lying, but it doesn't matter anymore."

She touched a button on her board and a screen sprang alight, limning her face in shifting green. A numbing wave of memory crashed over me, involuntarily, I retreated into the shadowed doorway, my heart lurching as the green woman staggered toward me once again.

"Smee's legit," Mama said. "But he's a lying sack of shit."

"What do you mean?"

"I raided BioGene's data banks. His records were buried, but I snuck past the data-sentry."

"Who is he?"

"Just who he says he is, Shamus Smee, an ace BioGene brain. Six weeks ago he melted down — burned his project memory, threatened his supervisor. He claimed BioGene was trying to steal his work."

"Were they?"

Mama thought for a moment. "Probably. But those are the terms going in. They bankroll you and give you free rein. In return, they get any commercial applications of your work."

"What happened then?"

"He went freelance. He's been heading south ever since, trying not to make his destination obvious. I backtracked him for a few weeks before I lost him, and BioGene's probably doing the same. The Feds, too, but the Feds are spread too thin with the insurrections out west to do much good." She paused, adding, "BioGene, though, they'll be along."

"Here?"

"Oh, yes."

"But why?"

"Well, that's the million dollar question, isn't it? I stole his project file, as much as BioGene could recover from the fried memory. You recognize this?"

She punched a button and the shifting green luminescence on the screen gave way to a three-dee diagram of pale blue lines. The board turned it this way and that, giving us the view from all angles. I didn't have to watch but a minute before I knew what it was: a spiderclaw. I recognized the queerly elongated thorax, the razor-edged claws and their attenuated silver wires. A chill ran through me. My pale green anencephalic grope lurched from the swamp of memory, her full breasts bobbing, her lips warm against my own.

"Do you know what it is?"

"No," I said through a throat so parched of moisture that it hurt to swallow.

Mama said, "I don't suppose BioGene's brains have sussed it out yet. But they'll put it together soon enough and then they'll know he's here."

"What is it?"

"God, I never would have imagined this, Kemp." She shook her head. "Healthy, inexpensive organ donors, that's all I ever intended. And then the crash came along and suddenly my research ground to a halt. Suddenly I'm just maintaining meat."

"That's my word for them."

"I never liked it, either. But God knows it's accurate. Anencephalic, right? Brainless shells. Cheap life-support systems for donor organs, that's all I ever had in mind."

"The spider.... That thing, what's it do?"

"It's a brain. Smee can program the initial parameters, probably control it, but unless I'm mistaken, it has the capacity for growth. It can develop self-awareness. It's pretty crude, but give it a generation or two and...."

We shared an uneasy silence and then Mama said, "What an ass I've been not to see this coming. Can you imagine the applications? Armies of cannon fodder. Mining. Any shitty job we can't bring ourselves to do..."

"But why's that so bad? Why should we have to do that stuff?"

"Because we should, that's why. We were just starting to come out of the dark ages, Kemp. We were just starting to grow up as a species." She

stabbed angrily at the board and the screen went black, plunging the room into darkness.

She said, "I know what you do out there at night."

"Mama, I — "

"It doesn't matter. It's natural, I suppose. You're twelve years old and that's hard enough in the best of times. But that doesn't make it right. You understand? It's not right to use another living being — "

"Isn't it? Is it so different from what you had in mind for them? Slicing them up and distributing their organs?"

"Maybe so," she said, "but this changes everything. I won't let him enslave them, Kemp." Her voice held an adamant anger like nothing I had ever heard before; not even when Daddy abandoned us for his jugged-whore.

"What are you going to do?"

"I did some damage to BioGene's system. I burned Smee's file and fried every record I could find of my own research. I won't let them pervert my work, Kemp. Smee and I, we're just alike in that respect, I guess."

"He asked me to disarm the house," I said. "He asked me to steal back his guns."

"And in return?"

"Lush. He said he would give me Lush."

"Is that the kind of gift you want, Kemp?"

"I don't know what I want."

"I've got a feeling you don't have the luxury of time. BioGene reps will be arriving here soon and they'll scare you more than Smee does. You're going to have to make some choices, and you're going to have to live with them. It's worth thinking about what they might be."

She was silent for a long time after that, and then she started speaking in this strange, toneless voice. "I used to wonder if I made the right choice, coming out here and living in the middle of nowhere. You were a smart kid, and I figured we'd be okay together. But somewhere along the line you started hating me. And now it looks as though I'm going to lose the work, too. Smee's come to take it away from me, and if he can't, BioGene will."

I wanted to answer her, but I didn't know what to say. Mostly, I was just glad for the dark and the way it hid her from my sight. I felt stranger than I'd ever felt in my life — bloated with emptiness, disconnected from

the world I'd known, but embarrassed at the same time, like I'd walked in and seen Mama naked.

"What I think now," Mama said, "is that I was probably wrong. You can't run away. You have to live in the world." She repeated that, like it was something I ought to remember — "You have to live in the world, Kemp" — and then she sighed. I heard her fumbling in the dark, and a moment later the room flickered with the light of a denatured cigarette.

"Smee smokes real cigarettes," I said.

"Coffin nails," she said. "That's what we used to call those things."

"Daddy smoked them, too."

Mama laughed. "So he did. Sometimes I wonder. Maybe if I hadn't been so driven he wouldn't have left. Maybe then you wouldn't hate me. Do you think about him often, Kemp?"

I stood there for a long moment trying to decide, but I couldn't seem to think on it clearly like I wanted to. All my thoughts kept getting tangled up in the smell of him, the woodsy aroma of jackleg whiskey and black-market smoke; that, and the feel of his big hands, gentle against my face, and the sound of his voice when he said it: "You're the man of the house now, Kemp. You've got to take care of your mama."

But for the life of me, I couldn't recollect his face.

"All the time," I said.

LUSH CAME TO ME that night, in a scattering of pebbles against my window. I threw aside the covers and gazed down at her, a small, pale figure in the clearing before the growing sheds, black and dimensionless against the blue hills beyond, like painted flats propped against the stars. I stole through the night rooms to the kitchen door, punching in the code to disarm the house.

In my silent bedroom, she stood naked before me, her body fuller than I had imagined, high-breasted and muscular, with a dearth of excess flesh. My hand trembled as I lifted it to touch her face, to trace the moonlit shadow of a bruise beneath her eye. She sighed, flinching, and I felt a swift rill of excitement tumble through me.

"Smee," she whispered, and I could see him in the eye of my imagination. I could see those strong hands raining blows upon her.

"Did he send you to me?" I asked. "Because I wouldn't want it, not that way."

"I came because I wanted to," she said. She said, "Are you gonna take care of me now, Kemp?"

The words detonated in my brain, triggering a flash of memory — his big hands against my face, his warm voice saying, "You've got to take care of your mama." That had been a vow, I knew, and I thought of Mama, forlorn in her darkened study, and I saw that I had failed in keeping it.

"I'll try," I said, knowing that this also was a vow, knowing too that I would fail in keeping it, knowing that I had to make it anyway. "We'll take care of each other," I said, and then the tears came, swift, silent tears for all that I had lost and all that I would lose, now or someday — my Daddy and my Mama and the only world I had ever known, the corpse gardens, the growing sheds and their acres of meat, all of it drifting inexorably out of my grasp in the moment I had finally reached out to embrace it.

Lush drew me to her breast. "Shhh," she said, and she made some other sounds, wordless murmurs meant to solace me, and they did. We stayed that way for a long time, I don't know how long, and then we found our way to the bed. Her mouth was warm and moist, her body flushed, her small breasts like ripe fruit, the nipples quickening beneath my tongue.

A strange and sudden hunger filled me up, and the first time I cried out before she even touched me. But Lush just laughed softly and cradled me in her arms, and after a while her hands found me. "It's okay," she whispered. "Slow down, don't rush it."

The second time was sweeter.

A foghorn called in the darkness. I plunged deeper into fathomless sleep, but the foghorn followed me, a note of panic in its broken voice; finally I rose to meet it, toward a faraway light. I broke the surface of consciousness with a shock as the foghorn's cry metamorphosed into something else. A scream.

I sat up abruptly —

— *Mama* —

— aware of a touch, tentative as the wings of a moth. Glancing into Lush's narrow-planed face, I suddenly came fully awake. A tsunami of

guilt crashed over me — Lush, the kitchen, Shamus Smee. The house. I'd disarmed the house.

Mama screamed again, and I heard a gunshot, the sharp, abrupt crack of a pistol.

"Kemp — "

I spun on her. "What have you done?"

I didn't stop to listen to her response. I stumbled up, reaching for my jeans, and that's when I caught a glimpse of the scene beyond the window, lurid in the bloodred light of dawn. Time slipped out of sequence. For a moment, I could do nothing but gape at the nightmare below, the growing sheds vomiting forth their freight of meat. The dead, everywhere the dead — upright, aware, awake, dead no longer if not quite alive, and striding with dumb purpose toward the house, toward *me*, their bodies root-shrouded and shining with sap, their green locks adrift like seaweed about their naked shoulders. And silent. Oh my friends, that was the worst of it, their silence. Not a single shout of joy, nary a cry of hope or hatred or despair. Just icy, implacable silence, just nothing. That's when I truly understood the vile miracle they had wrought between them, Mama and Shamus Smee. Light from the darkness, form from the abyss, they had conceived a new creation, they had served as midwives to its birth — and, my friends, I was afraid.

"My God," Lush said at my shoulder, and I turned in that timeless moment to gaze at her. I wanted to scream and strike her, to tear her limb from limb. She must have seen the violence in my eyes, for when she spoke again, her voice was hushed and pleading. "I didn't know," she said. "Kemp, I promise you I didn't know."

Then Mama's pistol went off once again and I fell back into the moment.

"Don't," Lush said, but I shrugged away her grasping hands. The hall was full of corpses. Half a dozen of the things turned to stare at me, their eyes aglitter in their slack gray faces as the door banged against the outer wall. Simultaneously, Mama appeared in the doorway of her bedroom, clutching the blue-steel automatic I had taken from Lush. The corpses wheeled between us for a moment, like cattle in a slaughter chute, and then, inexorable as compass needles seeking the magnetic pole, they swung back to Mama. "Get back!" she screamed, and a gout of orange flame leapt from the barrel of the pistol. A body dropped, convulsing in a

fountain of sap and blood, and the spiderclaw astride the thing's neck shorted out in a torrent of sparks. The stench of singed flesh — ripe eggplant shriveling in heat — permeated the narrow hallway.

Still they came on, two more in the hallway and a third mounting to the landing, with a shadowy fourth beyond. Mama squeezed off another shot and another body dropped in a spray of sparks and sap. I launched myself at the emerald shadow behind it, driving the thing over the railing. It tumbled in eerie silence to the floor below, but another of the things was already upon us.

Mama squeezed off a shot that went wide, blowing out a chunk of plaster, and still the thing advanced, stepping deliberately over the husks of its fallen comrades, charged with the implacable purpose of a machine. I slunk away, trying to conceal myself in the shadows, but the thing merely glanced at me, its flat eyes passing over me like I didn't even exist.

And maybe I didn't.

The thought triggered an eidetic montage, pregnant with mysterious significance, in my stunned brain. Again, I watched Smee finger his wafer board, again I saw my root-woven grope heave herself free of the foliage that bound her to the earth. Like I had slipped out of time, from the nightmare of one moment into the horror of another, I watched the scene replay — tasted once more the pressure of her lips against my own, caught a glimpse of Smee as his fingers flew across the wafer board, felt my pale green dollymop sag in my arms and fall boneless to the floor.

Dead, dead, dead. Just so much meat —

A gunshot shattered my reverie. I saw the bullet punch into the thing's shoulder, staggering it, but leaving the spiderclaw astride its neck intact. Regaining its balance, the creature advanced, first among a silent onslaught of the dead. Mama sighted down the barrel at it, her legs braced in a shooter's stance, her face above the pistol's bore like a strained white flag as she squeezed off another shot.

The hammer fell upon an empty chamber.

That sterile click reverberated in the gloomy hallway, loud as doom. I watched Mama pull the trigger again and saw the hammer fall on yet another empty chamber —

— *click!* —

— as the thing bore her screaming to the floor. And then she disappeared in a crashing tide of gray-green meat.

"Mama!" I stumbled toward her, my mind serving up an image of my Daddy, those big hands of his gentle against my face —

— *you've got to take care* —

— as a red haze enveloped me. And then I was among the dead. I could hear her screaming as I clawed and scratched at the pliant flesh, dragging the things from her writhing body. I heard a sound like a length of stovewood being snapped, and I caught a glimpse of her face — still, pale, dead — through the tangled limbs of green, and I knew that it had ended, but the screaming did not stop. And then Lush was there, coaxing me from the squirming mass of the not-quite dead, from the hot vegetable stench of them, and their fingers grasping. I knew then that Mama wasn't screaming — knew that Mama was forever past screaming, knew that maybe I never would be. But Lush held me, rocking me until my screaming *did* stop, and the enigma of that eidetic montage of images — Smee and his wafer board, my pale green dollymop boneless in my arms — at last snapped clear inside my head: You couldn't stop the things. You had to stop the man behind them.

Too late. Too late.

I found the shotgun locked up in Mama's study. The man himself I found inside one of the growing sheds, crouched over his wafer board and studying the projection of a spiderclaw that hung above it, dissolving into static and reconstituting itself with every whim of humid air. Prone beside him lay a shell of brain-deprived meat, its back and flaccid buttocks overgrown with soil-clotted roots. Every now and then, Smee turned and hunkered over the thing, peering through his jeweler's loupe as he probed with a tiny screwdriver at the spiderclaw astride its neck.

Me? I just stood there in the doorway for the longest time, trying to decide how to feel. I had passed two dozen brain-stunned corpses in the yard, wandering aimlessly, most of them, now that Mama —

I closed my eyes, dragging in a breath of heavy morning air, trying not to remember. But there it was: the image of Mama's broken body as the things drifted away from her, their eyes flickering without recognition over Lush and me, huddled there in the doorway to my bedroom. I thought I might be seeing that image for a long time yet, maybe every time I closed my eyes. But the dead — they took no interest in me and Lush. Crude,

Mama had called the spiderclaw brains, and I suppose they were, bereft of Smee's ill-will. But I couldn't help remembering something else she'd said, that they possessed the capacity for self-awareness. Maybe I could see the first vestiges of that, as well. For they didn't just stop, did they, once they had finished with Mama? They wandered instead, aimless-like, but maybe not entirely aimless. Like a newborn baby, maybe, drinking in the whole wide world.

A pair of them drifted through the emerald reaches of the growing shed, cocking their heads when the wheezers kicked on to flush the interior with nutrient-enriched air. That was my chance.

I crossed the growing shed quickly, careful of the root-bound meat still growing there. I saw holes and mashed up foliage among the rows where the spiderclaws had done their work, waking the things from mindless slumber to do Smee's bidding. But Smee himself never looked up, never turned to see me coming, didn't even hear me over the whirl and bluster of the wheezers.

I cocked the Mossberg and pressed the cold iron to his neck. About where a spiderclaw might sink its silver wires if one ever got the chance.

And Smee? Smee didn't even flinch.

"Ah, my boy," he said after a moment. "You've decided to join me. I've been wondering when you might happen by."

"You killed Mama."

"Did I, then? How unfortunate."

Now he moved. Slowly, I thought, backing away a step and holding the shotgun steady. Slowly, I thought — and found that I had said it aloud.

"Oh, yes, slowly," he said. "It wouldn't do to blow my head off, would it?" His fingers skated across the wafer board, and the hologram spiderclaw sizzled into nothingness. "I wasn't under the impression that you much cared for your mother, my boy."

"You killed her."

"Not me. *They* did it." He jerked a thumb at the two corpses adrift in the twilight reaches of the growing shed. They had wandered closer, their green shades blurring into mere suggestions of motion, human shapes abroad the verdant green.

"Because you told them to."

"Well, there's that." And he stood, those big hands clenching and unclenching at his thighs. In readiness, I thought. And I backed away

another step. "Question is," said Shamus Smee, "what do you intend to do about it, boy?"

My arms ached from holding the gun like that, but I never looked away from Shamus Smee. I saw his eyes drop, calculating his odds, and my finger tightened across the trigger. We hung there for a moment before Smee decided. I could see the tension go out of his body.

"I think I'm going to kill you," I said.

"Will you, lad? I don't think you've got the balls. You're a little like your mother in that respect, I'd say."

"I will — "

"Fine, then. Whatever." He waved a hand dismissively. "What did you think of Lush, my young friend? How did it feel to fuck someone who could fuck you back for a change? Hmmm?"

"You hit her, she wanted to come to me, she — "

"Did she?"

I broke off, inundated with memory: Lush at my window and Lush inside the kitchen door, the way she had kissed me there...distracting me just long enough that I forgot to arm the house again. Lush, saying, *I didn't know, I promise you I didn't know.*

But did she?

I glanced up, caught a glimpse of the pair of dead men maybe twenty meters away, and turned back to Smee.

"Where is Lush, by the way?" he asked.

"This isn't about Lu — "

"Not a pleasant one to have behind your back, I'd say. She's a dream between the sheets, that one, but a vixen otherwise. And it's worth remembering she has a reason to begrudge you."

"Lush — "

"I always kept a weather eye when I was fucking her, but you, you're different aren't you? You think she gives a damn about you, don't you? Boy?"

I'll never know why I spun when I did. Maybe it was a shift in Smee's eyes, though I don't remember it happening that way. Or maybe it was a tiny sound, some infinitesimal change in the pressure of the air. Or maybe it was luck. I kind of think it was.

But spin I did, the name rising like an accusation to my lips —
— "Lush" —

— and dying there, for it was not Lush. It was my pale green dollymop, my root-woven, sap-slick fuck doll with her gatefold tits and her mouth like a wound, my anencephalic grope, with a spiderclaw brain programmed by Shamus Smee and murder in her flat, cold eyes.

At the same time, I realized that the pair of corpses had flanked me, moving now with purpose, and suddenly it all came clear in my mind — Smee caressing the wafer board, the spiderclaw projection winking into nothing, and something else. He'd used the opportunity, hadn't he? He had called them to him, one and all. That's when the whole interior of the growing shed exploded into movement — dozens of the things, row after row of the unquiet dead, tearing themselves from their graves and standing erect, to stagger toward me.

I jerked the shotgun up and blasted a hole in the air half a meter above Smee's head. He dropped to his knees, covering his head with his forearms; in the same motion I levered another round into the breech and stepped forward, leveling the shotgun a half a meter in front of his face. My voice, when I spoke, throbbed with terror.

"Call them off!"

But Smee's gaze, when he met my own, was steady. "I would have let you go, you stupid child. You and that stupid whore. All you had to do was walk away."

Foliage rustled as the closer of the pair of dead men closed upon me. I swung to face it, yanking the trigger hard. The spread took the thing square in the throat and threw it half a dozen meters. It hit the ground, expelling a verdant spray of sap and blood. Already I was spinning back to Smee —

Too late.

I sensed more than saw his corded hand dart out. I tried to step away, but he moved with the speed of a striking copperhead. In a crashing succession of moments his thick hand closed like a vise around my ankle, the growing shed whirled and tilted under me, my face smashed into the fragrant earth. I'd lost the shotgun somehow. Smee rose to his knees, those big hands opening to choke the life out of me. I rolled to my left, kicking. My foot caught him square in the face and he stumbled back, flailing for balance.

I clawed my way through the dirt on hands and knees, scanning the foliage for the fallen Mossberg. I could hear Smee cursing behind me as he stumbled to his feet, but I didn't bother glancing back. Breath burned in

my lungs. Sweat blistered my forehead, slipping down to blind me. Any minute I expected Smee to fall upon me, that vise-like grip to close around my neck.

And then I saw it, a glint of oiled gun-metal, a hint of walnut stock, half-hidden in the overlapping leaves. I dove forward, fingers scrabbling in the dirt —

And then she fell upon me.

Oh yes, my friends, my moss-green fuck doll, my tit-swollen anencephalic grope, a jealous lover to the last — she snapped me up. I felt her fingers close about my shoulders like iron bands. She dragged me up against her, so close that I could smell her, raw vegetables and sweat and earth. And then she started to squeeze, emptying my lungs. Breath exploded out of me in a gust. Wrenching my head around, I caught a glimpse of Smee, his face a blood-streaked mess beneath his shattered nose. I watched him stagger toward the shotgun as black dots began to swarm across my vision.

With the last of my strength I buried my hands in the thing's hair and yanked, trying to snap her neck. My fingers trailed over something cold and hard —

— *the spiderclaw* —

— and I clutched at it desperately, tearing it from her flesh. Those attenuated silver strands whipped back and forth like the antennae of a crazed insect, and my dollymop collapsed. I caught a glimpse of her face as we went down, and for a single vertiginous moment I wasn't sure where I was. Her face shifted, malleable, a quicksilver mirror of other faces, lost faces — my daddy's big-city whore and my mother in the last moment I had seen her, just after that terrible wrenching snap, when her face went gray and restful.

Rage filled me as I scrambled away, scrabbling at the foliage-tangled earth with one hand and stumbling to my feet. Smee whirled to face me, holding the shotgun dead-level at my guts. I flung the spiderclaw in his face. He flinched, and I bowled into him at a dead run. We went over in a pile, the spiderclaw skittering away into the empty rows, and then I had slipped free of his grasping hands and rolled to my feet, clutching the Mossberg.

I backed away as the dead closed around me.

"Call them off!" I screamed, and what I saw before me in that moment

was not Shamus Smee or the encircling legions of the not-quite dead, but only that strange overlay of faces — my brain-deprived anencephalic grope, my daddy's redheaded whore, and my mama. Mama, her lips set as the dead things overwhelmed her. Mama, lying broken there in the hallway by her bedroom door, her face grim and gray and empty.

Dead. Dead. Dead.

Raw, red hatred enveloped me as I advanced upon him, screaming that he'd better call them off or I'd blow him straight to hell.

Smee backed away, but even then I think he knew it was too late. He must have seen the change in my eyes, he must have known that he had finally overreached himself. In the last moments, he stumbled to his knees, scooping up the wafer board in those big hands of his. His fingers skated across the keys as I closed on him, pumping a fresh round into the breech. I didn't even realize I had pulled the trigger until the spread caught him in the chest. He jerked suddenly, bee-stung, and a bright arterial stain blossomed on his camo jumper. His mouth worked for a moment, but nothing came out. Then he collapsed into the pit of a vacant grave.

He must have keyed in the final command as the gunshot took him, for all about me the dead abruptly dropped into the fecund soil that had grown them. The sound of it, that soft boneless collapse, took me back. Superimposed across my tear-glazed vision, I saw her once again, my verdant green dollymop, my lovely, lovely grope, so like my daddy's big-city whore. I felt her lips go slack against my own, I saw her slip away from between my clutching arms. And Smee's words echoed in my head: *Sometimes cruelty is necessary.*

Maybe so, I wanted to tell him.

But that doesn't make it right.

It took nearly a week to clean the place up. The whole time I kept my ears pricked for the thrum of engines winding up the ridge from Scary. I'd never known Mama to be wrong — not about something like that, anyway — and I figured it was only a matter of time before BioGene showed up in force, and maybe the Feds, too. I didn't want to be around when that happened, but I didn't want to leave anything behind if I could help it. Mama had given her life to keep Smee from enslaving the meat, and the more I thought about it, the more I thought she might have been right.

I guess I'd changed some.

Lush helped me gather the bodies. The ones Smee hadn't got to yet, growing mindless in the rows Mama made for them, we saved for later. We found the others, two or three dozen of them, scattered in clumps about the yard, in the house, just everywhere, wherever Smee had dropped them. We dragged them one by one into the clearing in front of the house and made an enormous pile of them, fly-swarmed and stinking of rot beneath the August sun. Last of all, we threw Smee on the pile, his chest all ragged from the shot, but his rat-like face unchanged. Then we drained some diesel off the wheezers out back of the growing sheds and soaked the whole pile down. And then we watched them burn.

I dug Mama's grave myself, off in a sun-drenched glade beyond the fence. You could see a whole stretch of purple ridges from there, winding south into the hazy distance of Tennessee, and I couldn't think of a prettier spot. I didn't reckon Mama would get much pleasure from the view, but I didn't want to give her cause for sorrow on the off-chance I was wrong. It wouldn't have been the first time, and God knows I had plenty to make up to her.

Lush and I, we had a little service over the grave and I tried to pray some, but I didn't do much good at it. I drove a homemade cross into the mound because it seemed like I probably should, and then we just stood there for a while and watched the sky turn smoky and red as the swollen sun dropped behind the hills. In the blue twilight, Lush said, "I didn't betray you, Kemp. I came to you because I wanted to. Because I didn't think I could take it anymore."

I didn't answer her for a while. I was thinking about something Mama had said, about how we make our choices and how we have to abide by them. I didn't know whether or not Lush was telling the truth, but I decided to believe her, partly because nobody else was left, but mostly because she was wearing that stupid mood shirt once again, and as I studied her in the falling light it seemed to me that it really had gone black with sorrow. It seemed as good a reason as any other, and I guess it still does because Lush and I, we're together yet, and this all happened ten years ago, plus change.

That night Lush and I slept together in my narrow bed, but neither of us felt much like fucking, so we just laid there in one another's arms. I suppose I cried some, and then we talked and before we knew what happened it had gotten so late that even the moon had fallen. We dozed off,

but I grew restless toward dawn. I opened my eyes and watched the morning steal across her face, all restful-like. I could taste her breath, sour with sleep, but kind of sweet at the same time, and it occurred to me that the thing I was feeling right then was pretty fine, better maybe than fucking after all. Then Lush woke up, too, and tried to convince me otherwise, and my friends, I have to tell you, she just about persuaded me.

Afterward, I cleaned up in Mama's bathroom. I was still feeling weird inside, the way I'd been feeling for nigh a week now, and I drifted into a kind of daze. Lush found me there, just staring at my face in the mirror.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Nothing," I told her, but actually I was wondering who I looked like. If I turned my head just right I could see a hint of Mama's lean, thin-lipped features, but I could see a hint of someone else, too, some stranger looking back at me. I couldn't say whether that was the daddy I hadn't seen in six long years or whether it was the man I was turning out to be. It doesn't matter, I suppose, because I won't ever know the truth. Almost no one ever does.

It took us most of the day to finish up there. I used a sledgehammer to smash Mama's computer equipment into little pieces, and then I crushed those pieces into smaller pieces still. We carried a bunch of stuff out to the humvee, and then we soaked down the house with more diesel fuel. I never thought I'd be sad to see the place go, but it was only the thought of BioGene drones combing through our lives that made me follow through and set the place alight. That's the way Mama would have wanted it, I suppose.

After that we hit the growing sheds, using the last of the diesel from the wheezers to soak down the structures themselves, not to mention the bodies — the restless, farting, brain-deprived bodies that Smee had never got to. That was hard to do, but it was harder still to set the things alight. The whole sky lit up red with flames as evening fell, and I stood by the last of the sheds for the longest time before I could bring myself to strike the match. And then I stood there a while longer and watched it burn. The bodies writhed as the fire devoured them, and the heat lunged out at me, and for the first time I had some doubts about the course I'd chosen. Slaves can always get their freedom, but the dead — well, they're just dead, aren't they?

I'm still thinking on that one, and I doubt I'll ever really suss it out.

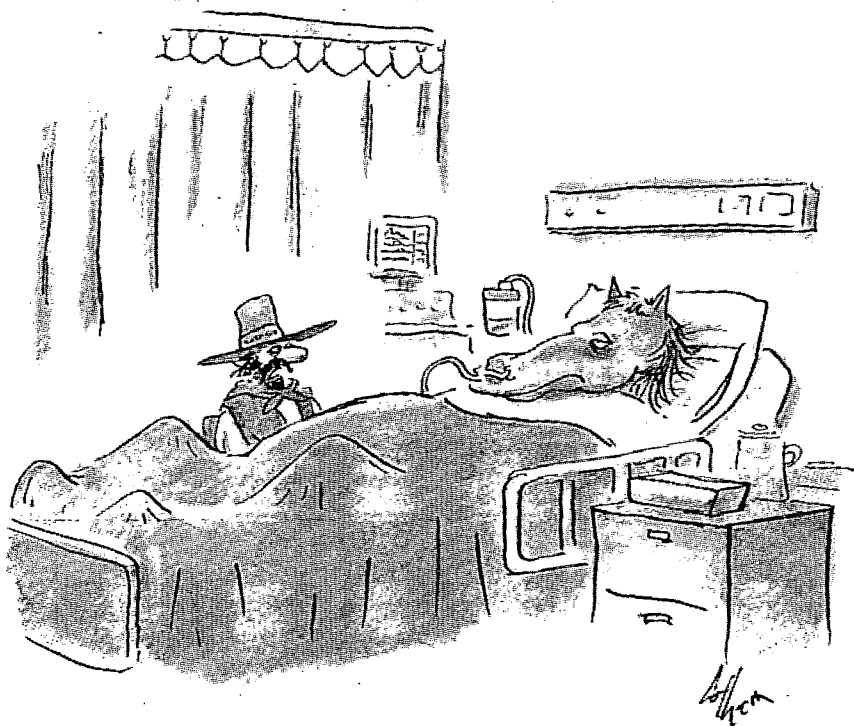
But the bodies writhing as they burn — well, that's an image that haunts my dreams even now. And I wouldn't be surprised if it always did.

And then we were done.

Lush and I stowed the last of our salvage and then I wandered off a piece into the burning compound and stood there for a time, just trying to say good-bye. As I walked back to the humvee, I couldn't help thinking of Mama's words to me on the night Smee and Lush had first arrived. It wasn't more than a week ago, but it felt like centuries.

Back then, I'd asked Mama if she ever longed to see the world, and what she'd said in response had puzzled me. *I've seen it, Kemp, she'd told me. It's overrated.*

I didn't have much doubt that she was right. But all the same, I thought, I probably ought to find out for myself. ☞



"So, how long did the doctor say I'd have to stay off your back?"

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CURIOSITIES

THE FIVE JARS (1922) BY M. R. JAMES

WHEN LED Zeppelin first sang mysteriously about an alarming "bustle in the hedgerow," we all assumed that they were over-indulging in psychedelic drugs. But in retrospect, Page, Plant, and Co. could have been tripping on something much more dangerous: M. R. James's short novel, *The Five Jars*. If so, they were no doubt referencing the scene where the nameless narrator, a demure, bookish gentleman of leisure (a fellow much like James himself, a noted scholar and writer of ghost stories who lived from 1862 to 1936), takes a stroll in order to ponder how he can best protect his five magical jars, delivered to him by a talking brook through the agency of a unique plant which the brook has advised the narrator to swallow whole. At the proper moment, our hero hears "a squeak and a rustle" from a hedge, and, investigating, finds the exact potent horseshoe which an invisible race of sprites known as the

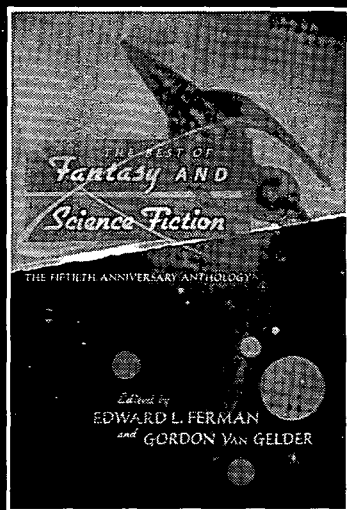
Right People have advised him to look for. Or perhaps we are meant to recall the passage where every bird in the neighborhood assembles in the hedges around the narrator's cottage to save him from the machinations of a supernatural tramp.

From the foregoing partial account, you can well imagine that *The Five Jars* is a very odd tale. The narrator, his senses expanded by the ancient unguents contained in the five phials, experiences a Rimbaudian paradigm shift in his conception of reality. Yet like E. Nesbit, James simultaneously layers in so much homey British commonsense that along with the narrator, we can exclaim, "How prosaic!" even while ingesting prophetic plants.

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—Paul Di Filippo

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